

**Anyone Can Do It:
Traditions of Punk and the Politics of Empowerment**

By Pete R.W. Dale

Re-submission for PhD
ICMuS
Newcastle University
2010

Blank page

Anyone Can Do It: Punk, Folk and the Politics of Empowerment

Contents

Title Page	Page i
Contents Page	Page iii
Introduction	page vi
Chapter One	page 1
i. What Is Punk? Style vs. Substance	page 2
ii. What Is Folk? Getting the Folk ‘Us’ in Focus	page 27
iii. Punk as Folk: Two Sides of the Same Coin?	page 57
iv. Chapter Conclusion	page 84
Chapter Two	page 88
i. Punk, Avant-gardism and Novelty	page 90
ii. Marxism, Anarchism and the Issue of Universality	page 119
iii. Justice to Come and the Micromatic Recoil	page 144
iv. Chapter Conclusion	page 183
Chapter Three	page 189
i. An Original Re-Birth?	page 191
ii. There Is No Authority, But... : Anarcho-punk	page 195
iii. Indie-Pop Ain’t Noise Pollution: The Cutie Movement	page 231
iv. Chapter Conclusion	page 269

Chapter Four	page 275
i. Still Birth?	page 277
ii. The Arrival of a New, Renegade, Girl-Boy Hyper-Nation: Riot Grrrl	page 284
iii. Delivering the Groceries at 128 Beats per Minute: Math Rock	page 326
iv. Chapter Conclusion	page 366
Conclusion	page 369
Bibliography	page 389

Blank page

Introduction

When the word punk is invoked, a majority of people – in the UK, at least – will think of the Sex Pistols, safety pins through the nose and other such bands and signifiers from the late 1970s. The purpose of this research, in large part, is to show that punk has in fact been a persistent and consistent tradition in the decades since. *Power* and *tradition* are the two concepts, above all others, which the thesis will assess in the light of the punk case. Four notable micro-scenes from this tradition are explored in case-studies. In each of these micro-scenes, elements of novelty have been apparent and seem to have empowered the participants in the scene precisely by giving them a sense of being subjects with clear differences from the larger tradition. Since this notion of subjectivity is based on a faith in novel difference as qualifier of identity, the thesis will employ philosophical work on difference, novelty and subjectivity in order to critically engage this aspiration. Does bringing something markedly new to the tradition truly empower the punks in their various micro-scenes? Alternatively, could fidelity to tradition perhaps lead to a greater empowerment in which the punk scene could gain greater influence within the macro-scene of popular music as well as, perhaps, encouraging political change in wider macro-social terms?

These are the crucial questions of the research, and will necessitate a degree of negotiation between Marxist and anarchistic orientations. Marx and the Marxists, on the one hand, have made a clear commitment to ambitions for macro-social change, as is well known. Anarchism, on the other hand, which many punks and punk bands have claimed as their guiding philosophy, is orientated around the micro-social unit. In some forms of anarchism, including some pronouncements of and slogans from

agents within punk scenes as well as particular theories within the wider tradition of anarchism, the ultimate unit for social change is the self. However, in most versions of anarchism, and more often than not in the punk underground which is the central focus of the current thesis, empowerment is sought in groups but in determinedly localised terms. Punks, as we will see, have often aimed to have no leaders and no heroes, and have presumed that restricting the scene to a small, ‘underground’ environment can ensure that this will be enabled. It is natural, then, that the research is heavily concerned with the movement of power within groups, with the problem of pure subjectivity conceived of as perfect individuality and with the possibility (or otherwise) of just power relations between subjects; of a certain *justice* that is. Being also concerned with the effects of new-ness and/or traditionalism, however, the research simultaneously queries the utility of Marxism’s demand for fidelity to a given strategy for macro-social change: the Marxist strategy, having a well-established and standardised aspiration for universal and total social transformation, perhaps misses the subjective empowerment which a sense of new-ness can engender in individuals, especially youthful individuals (and groups of youthful individuals).

Punk, as a tradition, has often veered between anarchist and Marxist strategies, in practice. Around 1977 and also 1991 in particular, but also at other times over the last thirty five years (the rise of ostensibly post-punk 1990s ‘indie’ bands such as Oasis, for example), punk has sometimes appeared as a significant influence on the macro-social or ‘mainstream’ culture; has aspired to a total transformation with a consequently Marxist flavour in the sense that the aspiration is for universal change. From the late 1970s onwards, however, there has also been a persistent and consistent punk underground which has often shown little concern with influencing mainstream

society and, correlatively, has actively sought a micro-social environment separate to and distinct from the wider society. It is in this underground punk movement that anarchist tendencies have been most strongly advocated and aspired to. Certainly punk has also had strong nihilist tendencies over the last thirty five years, and the existence of right wing tendencies within the punk movement will be acknowledged and discussed in chapter one. In the main, however, punk has insisted that ‘anyone can do it’.¹ Punks will often emphasise the importance of ‘personal politics’ at the expense of ‘Politics with a big P’, and will insist that involvement in punk can afford any person a degree of empowerment.² Nevertheless, punk’s underground micro-scenes, in particular, have sometimes been involved in more conventionally ‘political’ movements to differing extents, as will be shown in certain case-studies herein.³ Punk, in other words, has been involved in both micro- and macro-social politics.

¹ For example, Eric Davidson makes reference to punk’s ‘platelet-shifting thesis that “anyone can do it”, *We Never Learn: The Gunk Punk Undergut, 1998-2001* (Milwaukee: Backbeat, 2010), p.66.

² As noted by Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), especially chapter eight, ‘The Politics of Alternative Culture’, pp174-194. See p.186 for a specific distinction between what Duncombe wants to call politics with a little ‘p’ and politics with a big ‘P’.

³ Often this has been at a rhetorical level, such as the perceived spokeswoman for riot grrrl Kathleen Hanna’s claim that ‘I’m into revolution and radicalism and changing the whole structure’ (see chapter four) or cutie-associated group McCarthy’s insistence that ‘my red dream is everything’ (see chapter three). In Hanna’s case, some active involvement in protesting has accompanied her rhetoric; for example, she attended feminist protest rallies from the age of nine onwards, she has claimed. McCarthy’s vocalist Malcolm Eden, by contrast, seems to have eschewed active political engagement, even speaking out in recent years against environmentalists, animal rights protestors and ‘the people who demonstrated in Seattle’ (many of the latter, of course, being rank and file union members; Eden’s position being surprising therefore, since many had thought him a socialist),

This slogan, *anyone can do it*, is a vital one in punk, perhaps most commonly voiced in the mid-to-late 1970s. The early UK punk rock was supposed to offer an alternative to the high levels of musical dexterity and relative structural complexity found in the progressive rock which had then been dominant for many years. Punk, unlike ‘prog’, was basic music; a 1977 fanzine notoriously printed guitar tablature for three primary chords with the legend ‘here’s a chord, here’s another, here’s a third, now form a band’ written underneath.⁴

Anyone can do it, they say.

But what is *it*? And when we do it, what are we *doing*? Who, furthermore, is *anyone*? Can we simply accept that the *one* of ‘anyone’ is as easily locatable as the epithet *anyone can do it* would seem to imply? These are critical questions with which this study is intended to engage. By asking them, I attempt to gain insight into the nature and transmission of power and tradition, the two crucial areas of enquiry. If a musical environment could be created in which anyone – absolutely *anyone* – could perform; if that environment lacked all value judgements, so that no-one would offer a critical

<http://lacewings.wordpress.com/> . The punk group which has been most actively involved in larger political movements – particularly CND, which they are often said to have enormously revitalised in the late 1970s – is Crass (see chapter three).

⁴ Reproduced in Savage, Jon, *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), p.280. Each chord is accompanied by a guitar ‘tab’ for an open-position major chord. It is worth pointing out that Savage attributes the page to *Sideburns* zine, not the more famous *Sniffin’ Glue* fanzine which is often erroneously accredited with this hilarious piece of advice on ‘playin’ in the band... first and last in a series’.

opinion on anyone else's performance; if each performance within the environment offered some idiosyncratic characteristics, some statement of the elusive element 'individuality': could we say that in such an environment, anyone can do it?

In a sense, the anyone can do it formula proposes a possibility for an environment in which all power is absolutely dispersed. The moment, however, that a judgement is placed upon a performance ('I'm not into that band', or 'that's a good one'), the idea that 'anyone can do it' is undermined. It is a somewhat utopian ideal, in other words; it is hardly desirable beyond the rhetorical level, for in a strict sense to avoid value judgement is to de-value musical performance.

There is a need, perhaps, to clarify the way in which I shall be using the key terms power/empowerment and tradition. I will deal firstly with the couplet of power and empowerment. When I refer to power, in this thesis, I would refer to any social exchange involving imbalance. (When I speak, for example, I exercise power because the speech act requires a formal transmission in which imbalance between two or more persons is a pre-condition.) To that extent, I am following Foucault's argument that 'power relations are rooted in the whole network of the social'.⁵ However, the term 'power', as actually applied in this thesis, has a Derridean rather than a Foucauldian slant. For Derrida, speech and writing are not to be separated in any absolute way and, furthermore, writing is violence.⁶ Communication therefore

⁵ Foucault, Michel, 'The Subject and Power' in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3* (London: Penguin, 1994), p.345.

⁶ Johnson, Christopher, *Derrida: The Scene of Writing* (London: Phoenix, 2000).

involves a necessary imbalance which, in the terms I am using in this thesis, is constituted as a political power.⁷

To clarify the point, let us hypothesise a situation. A person says to another, ‘are you thinking what I’m thinking?’ This other person says nothing but undertakes some action which, hypothetically, we can estimate that both agents perceive as a response to the speech (joining in with the washing up, say, or helping to pick up a pile of books that have been knocked on the floor). The speaker exercised a certain element of power because their speech kindled an apparent response, it might not seem contentious to say. The apparent response in question is a political action, in the sense I am applying here, as is the initial question, because both appear to involve a social relation; what appears is an imbalance, in which an engagement – the question – would seem to demand a response. Politics, therefore, are social relations involving power; and power, in a certain sense, is the appearance of these politics. In the terms of the present thesis, political power might be manifested when some supposedly

⁷ In Johnson’s reading of Derrida, ‘violence is always already at work in the structuring of the social system [and] there is a necessary precession of violence in the constitution of any coded space’, Johnson, Christopher, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1993), p.73. It is this element of Derrida’s philosophy which I would argue is broadly in line with my contention here that communication always involves power. For Derrida, ‘communication is that which circulates a representation as an ideal content (meaning); and writing is a species of this general communication’, quoted in May, Todd, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas and Deleuze* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State, 1997), p.99. This ‘ideal content’ can never be made present, Derrida insists, hence the necessary imbalance I have referred to above: all communication, in other words, involves ‘*différance*’ (see chapter two for more on this key Derridean term).

punk-related musician sips champagne with a Prime Minister, therefore. It would also appear to be manifest in an environment where two friends talk, however.

It may be, we should note, that the first person in the above hypothesis was hoping that the other person would help with picking up the books/doing the dishes, just as they asked the question. We must note, that said, that it is impossible that this other person should know that such was what the first person had been thinking. This impossibility of knowing the thoughts of the other will be crucial in the theoretical work I undertake herein. (Also crucial will be the possible fact – though it is unknowable, and therefore in a sense this is simultaneously an impossibility – that both participants *may* come to the conclusion that sharing the task of picking up the books was just the right thing to do.) We might also add that this ‘political action’ – picking up the books, assisting with the washing up – is clearly communicational. We might call it a form of ‘speech’, indeed, perhaps even a certain type of ‘writing’, at least in Derridean terms: if the popular concept of ‘body language’ has any legitimacy in the application of its second term, after all, it should be clear that one can speak non-verbally, in a significant sense. What about music, then? Are power and politics written out by musical performance? Is the power chord appropriately named, for example?

For the present study, such is the case: music is political, music has power and, therefore, music has a political economy. I am using the term political economy here in a sense which corresponds at least partly to that of, for example, Karl Marx and Adam Smith: political economy as distribution of power between individuals and between/within social groups. Smith’s description of social groups as ‘classes’ within

the ‘division of labour’ was of course concerned primarily with the generation and nature of wealth, as signalled by the titling of his 1776 magnum opus *The Wealth of Nations*.⁸ In Book IV of that work, *Of Systems of Political Œconomy*, Smith queries ‘this popular notion that wealth consists in money’ and suggests that ‘the greater object of political œconomy [is] to diminish as much as possible the importation of foreign goods for home consumption, and to increase as much as possible the exportation of the produce of domestic industry’.⁹

Clearly, therefore, Smith conceives of political economy as being more than simply a matter of financial exchange, on the contrary taking pains to focus upon the power of material exchange to both generate and constitute wealth. Smith’s conception differs from my application of the term political economy here, however, in his focus upon the power of material commodities rather than conceiving of political economy as the appearance of social relations. The latter idea corresponds much more with Marx’s various contributions to critiquing thinkers such as Smith and David Ricardo. For Marx, the materiality of any given commodity is produced socially; matter, in other words, is always in motion, never a fixed given object but rather ‘a vanishing moment’ always with social consequences. This comes to the fore in a discussion of the ‘negation’ of bourgeois economy (communism, that is, presumably) in Notebook VII of the *Grundrisse*:

⁸ Smith, Adam, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Prometheus, 1991).

⁹ Smith, Adam, *Select Chapters and Passages from The Wealth of Nations* (London: MacMillan, 1915), p.218.

When we consider bourgeois society in the long view and as a whole, then the final result of the process of social production always appears as the society itself, i.e. the human being itself in its social relations. Everything that has a fixed form, such as the product etc, appears as merely a moment, *a vanishing moment*, in this movement. The direct production process itself here [in the negation of bourgeois economy, Marx seems to be saying] appears only as a moment. The conditions and objectifications of the process are themselves equally of it, and its only subjects are the individuals, but individuals in mutual relationships, which they equally reproduce and produce anew.¹⁰

This ‘direct production process’ would seem to be tied up with Marx’s idea, elsewhere in the passage, of economy as ‘real saving’ by which he seems to mean ‘saving of labour time’.¹¹ In his foreword to the translation of the *Grundrisse* from which I have sourced this quotation, Martin Nicolaus explicitly links this passage with Marx’s conception of the ‘social individual’ who ‘displays an all-sided, full, rich development of needs and capacities, and is universal in character and development’ and whom communist society could allow to exist.¹²

For both Marx and Smith, then, political economy is constituted not only in financial exchange but also in material distributions of wealth. Marx’s politics differs from Smith’s, however, in its heavy focus upon social relations as well as upon ‘material

¹⁰ Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, translated by Nicolaus, Martin (Middlesex: Penguin, 1939), p.712, emphasis added.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p.711.

¹² *Ibid*, p.51.

property'. For Smith, unlike Marx, materiality is transparent, unconditionally given and readily perceptible to any individual at any time. Marx's special contribution to discourses on political economy, in other words, is a particular post-Hegelian form of materialism quite distinct not only from Hegel's idealism but also from crucial tenets of earlier materialist philosophy overall. For Marx, matter ('such as the product') appears for a moment. Marx's special promise, which Derrida has called 'absolutely unique... singular, total, and uneffaceable', is the communist moment wherein private property and the other central elements of earlier theories of political economy *vanish once and for all*.¹³ Universal in character, the communist moment is supposed to appear all-sided, it is fair to say.

For anarchists, including many voices within the punk movement, this universality is either inconceivable or undesirable and perhaps both. For some punks and anarchists, moreover, all political economy, all sociality, is considered to be damaging: such argumentation was put forward in Marx's time, for example, by the egoist-anarchist Max Stirner; similar arguments, furthermore, have been put forward stridently today by Penny Rimbaud, sometime member of Crass, and others from the punk underground which I write of here.¹⁴ For many others, perhaps including Stirner's

¹³ Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Kamuf, Peggy (London: Routledge, 2006); first published in French 1993, p.113.

¹⁴ Rimbaud told me that 'the problem I have with Dial House [the Crass commune, where he has lived for more than forty years] and any interaction I have with anyone actually – where do I say “no”? Is it right saying “no”? I *never* feel right saying “no”' (author interview, Saturday 17th May, 2007, Newcastle upon Tyne). He also stated that 'I don't mind if I'm wiped out tomorrow, what's so important about me? And if I don't think important-about-me, why should I think anyone else is

other persona Caspar Schmidt and also the great majority of self-proclaimed anarchists in the punk scene, however, a certain form of political economy is certainly necessary, and also useful. The usefulness in question would be the generation of mutual aid (as in Kropotkin's theory of anarchism) and of localism and micro-social relations (as in a large part of the punk traditions I examine herein).¹⁵ Its main difference from Marxism, perhaps, is its desire to reject all authority, including the self-appointed vanguard party of the working class; the communist party, that is.

In terms of political economy, then, this research attempts to explore the tensions between universalist and essentially localist ambitions for alternatives to capitalism. Punk, as noted, has veered between these ambitions, in practice, as is reflected by the differing traditions analysed in the case studies herein. Anyone can do it, many punks will say. Yet can this idea be taken to a universal level? Is that level truly sought after by the punks? If so, how can this be squared with the emphasis on punk remaining beyond the mainstream (a desire constitutive to the self-proclaimed *underground* scene)? If not, what does the empowerment the punks find in their novel micro-traditions add up to? Surely then issues of *elitism* would become overwhelmingly problematic?

A universalist claim that anyone can do it might be more justifiable in the context of the folk scene than in the punk scene. Sam Richards, for example, has suggested that folk clubs have had 'an underlying ideology of participation, immediacy and

important?' The egoist anarchism of Max Stirner, meanwhile, and Marx's critique of it, will be discussed in chapter two below.

¹⁵ Kropotkin, Peter, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Freedom, 1902).

intimacy... a direct democracy which extended to anyone who wanted to be involved'.¹⁶ In punk, the high value placed upon *new-ness* coupled with the fact that (as Dick Hebdige pointed out long ago) the style is richly and confusingly *coded* results in a situation where it would be difficult to sustain a claim that the tradition has been welcoming to 'anyone'.¹⁷

In the post-war folk movement, however, some agents have complained of the extent to which such ambitions for total inclusivity have led to blandness. Such complaints will be discussed in chapter one, where a comparison between punk and folk musics will be made, and evidence will be offered of numerous vernacular and scholarly claims of similarity between punk and folk. This comparison is vital to the research questions posed above because post-war folk, like punk, has more often than not tended towards a generally left-wing ambition; more often than not has aspired to inclusivity; and, generally speaking, has offered variations of its tradition which, at times, have produced a certain empowerment precisely through that variation.¹⁸ The difference, however, is that one musical sphere – punk – generally wants to be new,

¹⁶ Richards, Sam, *Sonic Harvest: Towards Musical Democracy* (Oxford: Amber, 1992), p.81.

¹⁷ Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).

¹⁸ Variation from tradition has been much more accepted as being both inevitable and valuable in the post-war era, as compared with the pre-war period when keeping traditions pure was a more dominant ideal amongst folklorists. Variation from established styles has remained fraught with complaints from traditionalists, that said, but has sometimes led to a certain commercial power and a critical empowerment nevertheless, as we will see in the case of Bob Dylan in chapter one herein but as could also be said to have occurred with folk-orientated artists from the Pentangle to ('All Around My Hat'-era) Steeleye Span. These are exceptions, though, it is worth adding; overwhelmingly, traditionalists have been more popular within the folk scene and folk musicians have wanted to maintain traditions, not to knock them down in the way that punk bands have seemed to desire.

generally finds empowerment in ostentatious novelty and often concerns itself little with the wider society. Folk musicians, on the other hand, often seem to care little for novelty and, when they have left-wing affiliations (which is the case significantly often), are often willing to think of universality and social totality as a positive thing. Punk and folk, in this thesis, are sometimes compared in rather emblematic ways, therefore; never without significant foundation in the discourses of participants and commentators themselves, however, which I rely upon throughout.

Before proceeding, our second key term – tradition – requires some clarification and definition. The first thing to say is that the literature on this subject is vast, with folklore and ethnomusicology being particularly rich in discussion and debate as to the nature, role and function of tradition. The most long held position within this literature, initially deriving from the eighteenth century writings of Gottfried Johann Herder and firmly carried over into twentieth century thought by Cecil Sharp, is a dichotomous analysis: traditions derive from and have been carried forward by rural, non-literate ordinary folk, on the one hand, but tradition is threatened with the forces of change brought by modern, urban society, on the other hand. During the course of the twentieth century, scholars have made great efforts to nuance this analysis in recognition of its problematic over-simplicity; have striven to undermine the conservative tendencies associated with the writings of Herder and Cecil Sharp in particular.¹⁹ Fundamental aspects of the dichotomy have proven inescapable, however.

¹⁹ Richard Middleton, for example, has underlined the problematic aspects of Herder's insistence that 'The people (*Volk*) are not the mob (*Pöbel*) of the streets, who never sing or compose but shriek and mutilate', quoted in *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.217. According to Middleton, Herder was thus 'initiating a discourse that traversed the nineteenth century' up to and including Hubert Parry's dichotomous 1899 distinction between 'true

Much recent ethnographic and popular music studies literature has challenged and modified this tendency, nevertheless. A particularly useful resource from this more recent literature, for my purposes, has been Philip Bohlman's *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World*.²⁰ Particularly influential upon my work here is Bohlman's simple observation that 'folk music forms traditions, but so do other genres of music'.²¹ Also crucial in Bohlman's work, for me, is the focus upon tradition's necessary interaction with the modern world. The work of Bruno Nettl is also crucial on this subject.²² In terms of scholarly criticism of idealisation of the first English Folk Revival, Georgina Boyes *The Imagined Village* has been a useful source.²³ Particularly valuable, overall, on tradition, politics and popular song has been Dave Harker's *One for the Money*, with its critical view of capitalism's relationships with ostensibly anti-capitalist music, as well as the historical background Harker gives to this in his critique of British folksong scholarship since the eighteenth century *Fakesong*.²⁴ As a specific contrasting of folk and pop, volume one of the *Popular*

folk-songs' and 'common popular songs', *ibid*: p.217. Elsewhere, Middleton has stated that 'It is commonplace among scholars now to criticise the [conservative] view of folk music associated above all with Cecil Sharp', Middleton, Richard, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open, 1990), p.129.

²⁰ Bohlman, Philip, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Indiana: Bloomington, 1988).

²¹ *Ibid*: p.xiii.

²² For example, Bruno Nettl, *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1976). Bohlman makes explicit his debt to Nettl in *The Study*, p.xi.

²³ Boyes, Georgina, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

²⁴ Harker, Dave, *One for the Money: Politics and Popular Song* (London: Hutchinson, 1980); *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British Folk Song, 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).

Music journal is also certainly a vital resource, with its focus upon ‘distinctions, influences, continuities’ between the two areas.²⁵

Beyond musicology, a crucial intervention into the debate as to what constitutes a tradition has been made by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their hugely influential *The Invention of Tradition*.²⁶ As with Bohlman’s observation that it is not only folk which forms traditions, Hobsbawm’s central theses (outlined in his introduction to the book) are fairly simple and, for most readers, will not seem contentious: for example, his observation that many “‘Traditions” which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and sometimes invented’.²⁷ Whilst acknowledging that ‘There is probably no time and place with which historians are concerned which has not seen the “invention” of tradition’ of the type the various contributors to the book describe, Hobsbawm specifically links the increasing quantity of such invention with the modern period.²⁸ Invented traditions, according to Hobsbawm, are an ideological element of the superstructure built upon capitalism’s economic base.²⁹

For both folk and punk, then, the concept of ‘tradition’ is fraught. For the present study, we can summarise that the descriptor can be applied to any cultural trope or

²⁵ Middleton, Richard, Horn, David, *Popular Music: A Yearbook, Volume 1, Folk or Popular?: Distinctions, Influences, Continuities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁶ Hobsbawm, Eric, Ranger, Terence, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

²⁷ *Ibid*: p.1.

²⁸ *Ibid*: p.4.

²⁹ *Ibid*: p.3.

movement – such as punk – which has a degree of longevity and which carries forward certain identifiable practices and conventions. Punk, that said, is rather a special case in political terms because, although it is in that sense a tradition, it has also appeared to desire a radical break with tradition; it seems to have wished for a space beyond ideology and ‘superstructure’, in other words.

Although a comparison between punk and folk forms the central theme within chapter one of the present study, these more ‘thorny’ political and philosophical issues are explored in more detail in chapter two.³⁰ This is primarily attempted through a consideration of differing *modes* of empowerment, centring on the role of new-ness and its relation to tradition. Punk’s mode, it will be argued, encourages a sense of the new as condition for a certain subjective power. Folk musicians, on the other hand, seem to care little for novelty and, by implying that a valuable individuality could be obtained or observed in something of an objective sense, show a certain connection with Marxism. Which is more likely to bring justice? The latter term will be crucial in chapter two. Its application in the thesis overall is not easy to summarise briefly. At present, we can at least say that justice will be taken to involve social relations, or to put it another way, to involve a relation to the other. Justice, in other words, is one possible consequence of political or ethical relations (the distinction between politics and ethics will be explored in chapter two) but of course is not the only possible consequence. Naked imbalance of power – the relation between master and slave, say

³⁰ I use the word ‘thorny’ here on account of a question from the floor after my paper at the *International Association for the Study of Popular Music* conference in Cardiff, 2010 in which I presented several of the key themes from the present study. My questioner, Dr. David Sanjek of Salford University, expressed admiration for my decision to ‘dive in to the bramble patch’ of political contention between Marxist and anarchist tendencies.

– is one locus of injustice, we can reasonably say. A crucial question for this research, however, is of the extent to which power relations can be balanced. If anyone can do it, does this imply that everyone can be equal? If not, what balance of justice *is* aspired to in punk, folk and other such loci of the aspiration in question? If justice is different from, for example, slavery, how so? Can justice retain imbalance of power and remain just?

On this issue, the work of Jacques Derrida will again be very helpful. For Derrida, justice can be said to be conditionalised by two crucial elements. These can be summarised as conditions of temporality and of sociality. With regard to temporality, Derrida has insisted upon ‘at the heart of justice, of the *experience of the just*, an infinite disjunction’.³¹ This disjunction has ‘an irreducible dissociation: no justice without interruption, without divorce, without a dislocated relation to the infinite alterity of the other, without a harsh experience of what remains forever *out of joint*’.³² The last words, emphasised in the original, are Derrida’s deliberate invocation of the Hamlet-derived phrase ‘the time is out of joint’ which forms a central motif within his *Spectres of Marx*. Derrida has declared the latter text ‘is perhaps first of all a book on justice’, but it should be noted that he immediately nuances this by saying that the book is ‘on a justice that is not to be confused with harmony, proportion, order’.³³ This lack of harmony and order is crucial to Derrida’s idea of justice, and not just in terms of temporal disjunction: for Derrida, the justice

³¹ Derrida, Jacques, Roudinesco, Elisabeth, *For What Tomorrow...: A Dialogue* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004), p.81, emphasis retained.

³² *Ibid*, p.81.

³³ *Ibid*, p.80.

which perhaps could arrive when the time is out of joint *also* requires a ‘paradox of fidelity to the other’.³⁴

It would be premature to explore this paradox too deeply in this introduction. At present, however, we can note that Derrida at least wants to consider the possibility (or impossibility, as some have read Derrida to say, as we shall see) of relations between the self and the other. Thus he talks of a ‘justice to be invented’ in which it would be possible ‘to take into oneself, to watch over, to welcome the wholly other without this wholly other dissolving or being defined with the same in the same’.³⁵

The last words reflect Derrida’s unrelenting wish to puncture the idea of justice as perfect (that is, equal or ‘symmetrical’) social harmony, yet the welcoming/taking in of the other which he talks of here seems to suggest that a just glimpse of social connection could *perhaps* be thinkable; just a glimpse, perhaps, but one about which we might be able to feel optimistic. To coin a Derridean-sounding phrase, though not one he actually used it should be added, I am suggesting that justice might be a harmoniousness without harmony (or, better, without absolute harmony; justice as harmony which retains dissonance, we might say).

In punk, judgements as to whether something is *new* are often paramount, as I will show. In the traditions of punk, that is, a sense of the new often seems to allow

³⁴ Ibid, p.138.

³⁵ Ibid, p.138. The phrase ‘wholly other’ is very likely intended to invoke Levinas: his 1973 essay ‘Wholly Otherwise’ (*Tout autrement*) questions whether Derrida had really broken with a Kantian metaphysics, according to Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp.145-187. Shared ground between Levinas and Derrida, as well as distinctions between the two theorists’ ideas, will be explored in chapter two herein.

something of a sense of a ‘time out of joint’ in which, just for a moment, some mutual empowerment might be felt to be apparent.³⁶ The problem, that said, is that the form of justice this might offer could be judged to lack value precisely due to its temporal instability (being out of joint, that is). The empowerment that punk would seem to offer, in other words, empowers anyone lucky enough to appear present at its nebulous ‘moment’ but judges the ‘un-hip’ late-comers to the moment to lack the value that the originators of the new punk tradition had in a supposedly ‘original’ moment. (The problematic notion of pure originality will be discussed in chapter two below).

Value judgement and new-ness are key concepts in the present study, therefore. At face, the idea that anyone can do it would appear to dissolve the problem of power and value. However, in chapter one in particular, it will be shown that the punk movement and the contemporary folk scene certainly have maintained strong value judgements within their discourses, despite the occasional rhetoric to the contrary. By value judgements, I simply mean that participants have offered opinions as to the quality of the music, whether it be when a floor singer performs in a folk club or when a young and musically inexperienced band performs at a punk gig.

How could things be otherwise? To say ‘I like music’ is to make a value judgement. It is perhaps surprising, that given, that an explicit rhetorical turn against value

³⁶ Many punks will talk of their participation in the scene as producing a form of mutual empowerment and micro-solidarity, as we will see. It is important to underline, having said this, that for Derrida it is crucial to problematise the idea of any pure mutuality, as the careful reader should already have realised from my comments thus far.

judgement has been remarkably common within certain areas of musicology over the last two decades or so. Ruth Finnegan's groundbreaking research on *The Hidden Musicians* of Milton Keynes, for example, states itself *not* to be 'concerned either to establish what kinds of music (or music-making) are "best" or "highest"'.³⁷ Finnegan argues that we need not know her 'own preferences' since 'my own ethnocentric evaluations [would then be implied to have] universal validity.' Her ambition to 'treat the many different forms of music as equally worthy of study on their own terms' is admirable enough as an aspiration. The possibility of an entirely judgement-free study, however, should be doubted given that, as Derrida has pointed out, 'whether he wants to or not – and this does not depend on a decision on his part – the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them'.³⁸

Another example of a tendency to want to wish away value judgements from musicology is the generally admirable and rightly lauded work of Christopher Small. His key term *musicking*, he argues, 'will remain useful only for so long as we keep our own value judgments clear of it'.³⁹ Since Small acknowledges that music can give him a pleasurable feeling 'in the seat of my pants', he clearly has made some value judgements about musical objects, however.⁴⁰ Should we accept, from his own

³⁷ Finnegan, Ruth, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), this quotation and all others in this paragraph pp.6-7.

³⁸ Quoted in Johnson, *Derrida*, p.57.

³⁹ Small, Christopher, *Musicking: The Meaning of Musical Performance* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), p.9.

⁴⁰ Small, *Musicking*, p.15.

argument, therefore, that the term musicking is no longer ‘useful’? To do so would be to impoverish musicology, academia and all.

Elsewhere, Jason Toynbee has suggested that ‘we should all be creators together, and in this way transform the limited social practice of music making into something universal and collective’.⁴¹ It is a noble enough aspiration in principle. A question which arises, however, is as to whether Christopher Small, for example, should or should not communicate to others his value judgement as to the pleasure music making has given him in the seat of his pants, subsequent to the transformation Toynbee desires. If Small avoids revealing his apparent pleasure, perhaps music making could become ‘universal and collective’, and perhaps society could cohere universally. Perhaps, however, the risk is that Small’s pleasure could disappear. The solution, it might be argued, could be for the inherent collectivity of music making to aim not for universality but, rather, for local evaluation and a more immediate responsibility. Elsewhere, Toynbee has promoted the value of musicians ‘creating in small amounts’, which would seem to encourage such a thing in the sense that a creator with a less ostentatious ‘amount’ of creativity would seem to be more likely to gain the approval of a local audience than a mass audience.⁴²

⁴¹ Toynbee, Jason, ‘Music, Culture and Creativity’ in Clayton, Martin, Herbert, Trevor and Middleton, Richard, *The Cultural Study of Music* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp.102-112: 111.

⁴² Toynbee, Jason, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000), p.162. This comment presupposes that I am right in interpreting Toynbee’s idea of ‘creating in small amounts’ to indicate a desire for less radical stylistic change, or in my terms a less ostentatious novelty. Certainly this is the interpretation Keith Negus and Michael Pickering have made in critique of Toynbee, ‘Creativity and Musical Experience’ in Hesmondhalgh, David, Negus, Keith, *Popular Music Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002), pp.178-190. Negus and Pickering use Dylan’s notorious mid-1960s

In any case, value judgements are necessary in music, just as power (or disproportion, we could say) is an inevitable element within communication. The only sense in which music could remain valuable without value judgement would be in some solipsistic, self-as-author-and-audience sense: pure and absolute individuality, that is. Again, there have been arguments in musicology that such a thing is possible, in the future if not today. Jacques Attali, for example, has idealised

the production, by the consumer himself, of the final object, the movie made from virgin film... [This consumer] will thus become a producer and will derive at least as much of his satisfaction from the manufacturing process itself as from the object he produces. He will [thus] institute the spectacle of himself as the supreme usage.⁴³

Attali's idea that a musician could be 'inventing new codes [by] inventing the message at the same time as the language' makes it difficult to see the extent to which

turn to electric amplification as evidence that apparently radical novelty (creating in large amounts, we presumably could call it) can create a situation wherein 'the epithet "genius" is not unfair' (p.185).

Whether or not this claim of genius is fair, there is no doubt that this stylistic shift made by Dylan contributed grossly to his reputation and commercial success, as will be discussed in chapter one. It is fair to guess, therefore, that if Dylan had continued with his acoustic, protest-orientated folk sound – differing from the tradition in small amounts, thereby – instead of changing in a large amount by 'going electric', he might have retained a localised fame within the folk scene but quite possibly would not have reached as much of a mass audience.

⁴³ Attali, Jacques, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p.144.

his text *Noise* deserves a sub-title regarding *The Political Economy of Music*, at least in the sense of ‘political economy’ I have offered above.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this kind of paradoxical thinking – fundamentally avant-gardist in character, I would say – has retained a certain currency within some popular music scenes, and perhaps none more so than the punk scene (where an absolute re-birth of ‘year zero’ is often presumed to be possible, as we will see). It is natural, therefore, that my research examines some problems connected to the solipsistic ideal inherent to certain avant-gardist aspirations, primarily in chapter two.

Having said above that chapter one will offer a comparison between punk and folk musics, it is perhaps necessary to make clear in this introduction that the folk music under discussion is primarily of the post-war folk tradition, with very little mention of the earlier revival associated with Cecil Sharp. This is not, overall, a study of folk. Folk music is brought in to the discussion partly because it has been associated with the slogan ‘anyone can do it’ (though in a significantly different way from punk), partly due to their differing approaches to tradition, and partly because so many have claimed punk and folk to hold similarities.

It is clear, however, that there are great difference between the two spheres. Some of these, that said, may not be as simple as might at first be presumed. At a glance, for example, the punk – the total outsider, the alien, the negationist *in extremis* – might seem an obvious *individualist*. The folkie – usually anonymous in appearance, performing music which has been performed in the same manner for countless years with little or no concern for significant alteration – could easily be presumed as a

⁴⁴ Ibid: p.142.

bastion of *collective* creativity. Contrary to this apparent dichotomy, however, consider the following comments from an individual considered at the time he voiced them to have been the classic folk singer of his day:

I won't even have a fan club because it'd have to have a president, it'd be a group. They [the civil rights/protest movement] think the more people you have behind something the more influence it has. Maybe so, but the more it gets watered down, too. I'm not a believer in doing things by numbers. I believe that the best things get done by individuals...⁴⁵

Bob Dylan, to whom these comments have been attributed, sits uneasily within the post-war folk movement, hence a particular interest in his work in chapter one of this study. Nevertheless, he continues to be considered by many as a folk singer as much as anything. His comments are interesting to contrast with the following opinion from Linder, a significant player within the early Manchester punk scene of the late 1970s: 'There was that joy when you arrived at the venue. Here I am among the dispossessed, all punks together.'⁴⁶

It seems, then, that the question of individuality and of collectivity as they relate to punk and folk respectively may be more moot than might at first seem obvious. My study attempts to grapple with this issue with some philosophical rigour, relying

⁴⁵ Bob Dylan, quoted in Shelton, Robert, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (London: Penguin, 1986), p.287.

⁴⁶ Linder, artist and vocalist of punk group Ludus, quoted in Sabin, Roger, *Punk Rock, So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge, 1999), p.193.

largely on a continental, ‘post-structuralist’ paradigm in general and, as the reader will likely have already realised, on the work of Derrida in particular. One reason for this general emphasis upon continental philosophy and particularly upon the theories of Derrida is simply that such philosophical work focuses crucially upon issues of individuality, subjectivity and collectivity which are at the heart of my enquiries here.

Derrida’s political turn of the 1990s, meanwhile, is useful for the argument I want to make in this study because, in *Spectres of Marx* and *Politics of Friendship* in particular, he engaged with and put under pressure yet certainly did not dismiss the value of political engagement.⁴⁷ On the contrary, Derrida talked emphatically of an ‘indeconstructible’ justice which could emerge from time out of joint.⁴⁸ Perhaps because this justice is proposed as being necessarily unstable in temporal terms, or perhaps simply because he was drawing on Marx in ways which differ from the orthodox Leninist-Marxist interpretation, Derrida drew great hostility from many voices from the traditional left.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the French theorist would appear to have sympathised to some extent with the anarchist Max Stirner and has displayed other elements of anarchistic tendencies in his thinking, as I shall demonstrate in

⁴⁷ Derrida, Jacques, *Politics of Friendship*, translated by Collins, George (London: Verso, 1997).

Politics of Friendship and *Spectres of Marx* place the concept of justice under such pressure that some commentators have queried whether they can allow for any political engagement to remain thinkable/valid; I will show, in chapter two, that politically optimistic readings of these books have been made, however.

⁴⁸ Derrida declares emphatically that ‘justice is indeconstructible’ in Derrida, Jacques, Ferraris, Maurizio, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), p.56.

⁴⁹ For several examples of orthodox Marxist hostility to Derrida’s political turn, see Derrida et al, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999).

chapter two. Derrida's work, therefore, is used in my research here to provide a position indebted to both Marxist and anarchist theories but irreducible to either.

Another reason for the particular focus upon Derrida, as opposed to other theorists within the continental field, is the distinctiveness of his ideas about what I will call *novelty* (new-ness, that is, though the connotation of novelty as trivial gimmickry and banal peculiarity will be worth bearing in mind at times in the present study). Derrida has stated clearly that the arrival of something new is necessary, as I will show in chapter two. Since he has also indicated that time out of joint can afford a radical disjuncture precisely by providing a disjoined time without conjunction, however, there remains a question as to whether a shock of novelty can nevertheless encourage something of the disjoined arrival about which Derrida theorises. This question has clear implications for my examination of the relationships between tradition and power.

Structure and Methodology of the Research

The research is divided into four chapters, each of which is intended to address the main themes and problematic questions identified above. The first chapter is an attempt to provide a workable definition of punk, distinguishing carefully between mainstream and underground variants thereof. The nature of folk music is then discussed at length in the second section, as a comparative case of a music scene or 'field' with a distinct approach towards tradition. (I use the word field here, and elsewhere in the thesis, as a general alternative to, for example, the words scene or style: folk music, *en masse*, is not really a scene but more of, to introduce yet more

terms, a collective *oeuvre* or stylistic *milieu*; by referring to folk or punk as fields, I wish to connote this broadness, rather than the smallness or localism which I feel is implied by the word scene.⁵⁰) Many have claimed a similarity between punk and folk, as I show; exploration of the similarities and differences between the two traditions begins in this second section and is extended in the third section. This extension of the comparison in the third section develops into a careful examination of the differing political trends and aspirations of the punk and folk movements. Bob Dylan is used as a case-study which shows a moment in which a firm break with tradition seems to have had definite political implications. I suggest that this break may indicate Dylan as a precursor of certain trajectories within punk, and give some consideration to the somewhat counter-intuitive idea that 1970s punk was more of a continuation from the 1960s counter-culture than might at first seem obvious.

Chapter two expands the exploration of the political significance of breaks from tradition. The chapter is more theoretical and philosophical in character, as compared with the first. In the first section, I examine the politics of novelty, with examinations of Futurism, avant-gardism, Leninist vanguardism and theoretical issues of leadership and/or its alternatives. This leads to a second section in which I explore and compare traditions of Marxism and anarchism, both in their nineteenth century trajectories and in the more recent period in which anarchism seems to have had something of a resurgence, one site of which would be the punk tradition. Debates around ‘universality’ and an alleged resistance to ‘foundationalism’ in post-1968 post-

⁵⁰ I am not, therefore, using the word ‘field’ with anything like the special sense it is given in the work of, for example, Pierre Bourdieu in texts such as *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996); first published 1992 as *Les Regles de l’art*.

structuralist theory are also considered at some length. This lays the theoretical ground for work on what I call the *new-sense* and its relation to justice in the third section of chapter two. In this last section, Derrida's ideas become particularly prominent. It is worth acknowledging in advance that my reading of Derrida is in itself somewhat deconstructive. In other words, I apply Derrida's technique of amplifying certain subtleties and apparently minor under-currents in the text in order to make a reading which is perhaps less than obvious on first readings of his work. Certainly my reading emphasises elements of Derrida's arguments which secondary readings of his work have not always commented upon – for example, his discussion of the 'recoil' in *Politics of Friendship* – and builds an interpretation from these elements which is deconstructive in the sense that it attempts to emphasise that which is inferable from the text yet is less than obvious or little remarked upon.

Chapters three and four differ from the earlier chapters by focusing more specifically upon traditions of punk and the way that they have allowed different modes of empowerment in musical and cultural terms. Essentially, a set of four case-studies (two per chapter) offer 'snapshots' of crucial periods from the decades since the Sex Pistols helped to bring the word 'punk' into international consciousness. Culturally, some effort is made in each instance to situate the punk micro-scene both within the wider tradition of punk and also in a social-historical context. Musically, analysis focuses upon the elements which may have appeared to be significantly new within each micro-scene or, alternatively, which may have provided something more traditional in the punk context. In other words, the analyses focus upon what is going on in the music because the research is intended to give a set of pictures of the traditions of punk. By giving a general picture of the musical content, then focusing

on particular elements supplementary to the wider punk tradition, the analyses give detail of both the tradition at large and the various micro-traditions with which this study is concerned.

These musical analyses often focus upon harmonic details, primarily because the use (and often the seemingly deliberate *mis-use*) of functional tonality is an identifiable method used by punk bands to mount a perceived challenge to musical normalcy. In other words, the breaking of harmonic expectations, for example through the introduction of modal strategies such as heavy emphasis upon \flat VII chords (a strategy which crops up in many of the cases I discuss), is the site of precisely the attempt to step into the ‘unknown’ which, in chapter two, I propose as an avant-gardist strategy.⁵¹ Conversely, the use of clichéd harmony such as the ‘three chord trick’ often functions, as I attempt to show, as a form of conservatism which punks will often denigrate precisely for its traditionalism and disempowering lack of novelty.

In chapter three, the case-studies are both of UK-orientated punk scenes from the 1980s. The first, *anarcho-punk*, has some roots in the late 1970s when a certain degree of fundamentalism provided one response to the ‘mainstreaming’ process often said to have been enacted by the ‘new wave’ groups. The scene came to its strongest

⁵¹ The \flat VII chord in itself is not so unusual in pop and rock, of course; it is very heavily used in D:ream’s ‘Things Can Only Better’, to pick just one example from many. I attempt to show in chapters three and four, however, that modal harmony often figures in a decidedly clumsy or ‘unprepared’ way in punk and indie musics, strongly in contrast with the relatively smooth harmonic progression of D:ream’s song, to stick with the example. My interest here is as to why the punk and indie groups so often feel the desire to present dissonant elements, and how this impacts upon the economy of audience reception.

fruition in the early 1980s. Anarchistic in a strong sense, anarcho-punk nevertheless included a range of different political attitudes and aspirations within its spectrum, some key trajectories of which I discuss in some detail. As anarcho-punk dwindled in its significance around 1985, a quite different continuation of punk culture known as *cutie* or *C86* arose and held some significance until around 1988.⁵² Though markedly different from anarcho-punk, with some socialist allegiances which I emphasise in my account, the cutie scene was not entirely divorced from the earlier anarcho-punk scene, as I show. Both were clearly supplementary to an anterior UK punk scene which I trace primarily from the Sex Pistols for culturally obvious reasons; both were very much traditions of punk, but each with its own novel differences from the macro-tradition.⁵³

⁵² Describing bands within the scene in question as ‘cute’ or ‘cutie’ was very common in the late 1980s, amongst other epithets such as ‘shambling’, ‘indie’ ‘pop’, ‘twee’ and ‘C86’ (see chapter three, beginning of section ii for more detail on this). This is reflected, to give just one example, in retrospective comments from archetypal cutie group the Rosehips: ‘we signed to the very happening Subway Organization label, thereby becoming officially “cute”, but that whole cute thing wasn’t so much about twee-ness, as is the common misconception, it was and still is about DIY, the old punk ethos’, sleeve notes to *The Rosehips*, CD album, Secret Records, SHHH CD 971, 1997.

⁵³ See previous footnote: it is very clear from this, and several other quotations I offer in chapter three, that agents at the heart of the cutie scene regarded it as a continuation of the punk tradition. The Rosehips are a good example of a cutie group whose fast, distorted-guitar-driven songs were decidedly comparable with the general sound of anarcho-punk (particularly the earliest exponents of the latter scene, such as ‘Tube Disaster’-era Flux of Pink Indians). It is also worth mentioning that, again similarly to many key anarcho-punk groups, the Rosehips were outspokenly opposed to industrial mistreatment of animals, as is reflected in song titles such as ‘Bloodstained Fur’ and ‘A Slow Painful Death to Vivisectionists Everywhere’ (both featured on *The Rosehips* anthology).

Chapter four shifts its focus primarily to the 1990s and also largely to the US punk underground movement which, as is well known, has been distinct from that of the UK in several ways. As is inevitable in any discussion of US punk in the 1990s, the spectre of Nirvana hangs heavily over the chapter: their album *Nevermind* is widely perceived to have been a landmark in the history of punk and provided a watershed moment in international terms as well as, especially, within the US scene. My primary interest, that said, is in two punk subcultures whose development was largely parallel to the rise of Nirvana, though I acknowledge that all punk-orientated music after 1991 has to be post-*Nevermind* in a literal sense as well as, generally, in terms of a wide cultural hermeneutic (I also make some effort, towards the end of chapter four, to consider the influence upon punk of certain wider historical, cultural and political developments). My first case study in this chapter is the *riot grrrl* scene, which I take to be a strongly punk-orientated subculture from around 1991-4.⁵⁴ The second case study in chapter four is of the *math rock* or *post rock* scene (the distinction between these two terms is explored in the course of the discussion). Typified by certain unusually ‘musicianly’ bands of North America from the 1990s, this trend makes an interesting case to close on because, as I show, a punk movement which once had claimed to encourage the amateur with the slogan *anyone can do it* featured, by the end of the twentieth century, some players with a level of musicianship reasonably described as virtuosic, at least within a rock context.

⁵⁴ As with the cutie scene, there is significant contestation over what does or does not belong within the nominal bracket, meaning that it might have allowed less authorial prejudice if I had coined neologistic descriptors in order to refine what is and is not intended to be gestured at. Some effort has been made to clarify which of the groups known as riot grrrl groups I am focusing upon in chapter four, however.

There are many other subcultural strands descended from punk which I could have investigated instead: the early 1980s *psychobilly* movement, for example, which had a definite *anyone can do it* ethos within it as well as a strong visual and musical connection with the earlier punk scene; the *grindcore* punk associated with labels such as Earache records and bands such as Carcass; the *industrial noise* scene which, though influenced by some pre-Sex Pistols agents such as COUM and Einstürzende Neubaten, is identifiably punk-related; and so on. There have also been developments connected to the punk underground since the 1990s, some of which I mention in the conclusion of this study. The reason I have preferred to select the four case-studies listed above is two-fold. Firstly, I feel that, together, they give a helpful picture of traditions of punk and, in combination, serve to elaborate the crucial point that punk's varying micro-traditions rely upon a sense of new-ness for their appearance of political empowerment. Despite this sense of new-ness felt by participants in each of the case studies, the micro-traditions in question inter-relate in a manner which the psychobilly, grindcore or industrial noise traditions (for example) do not.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ For example, Crass (the foremost anarcho-punk band) are known to have inspired Ian MacKaye of Fugazi/Minor Threat, who in turn played a significant role in the riot grrrl and math rock scenes, as shown in chapter four; the riot grrrls were inspired by many of the cutie groups and, partly as a negation, by the US hardcore punk scene which in turn had been inspired by Crass; and so on. The psychobilly, grindcore and industrial noise scenes, by contrast, display less obvious inter-relations, although nevertheless there is some connection with the wider punk movement (Wild Billy Childish, for example, had some involvement with psychobilly and also a certain influence upon riot grrrl; the grindcore and industrial noise scenes are not entirely detached from the four case studies I have preferred to focus upon; and so on).

The second reason for examining these four particular punk micro-scenes is a degree of personal involvement in them. This is less the case with the anarcho-punk scene, which I am rather too young to have been much involved in, at least during its perceived heyday (the early 1980s). Anarcho-punk in general and Crass in particular are so influential upon the traditions of punk (a remarkably little known fact in academic circles) that this had to be the first case study, however. The cutie, riot grrrl and math rock scenes, meanwhile, are scenes which I have had significant personal involvement in. Indeed, I have been called upon several times by scholars of punk/indie/DIY music as an ‘insider’ whose recollections might be valuable to their research. This is because I co-ran a vehemently independent/‘DIY’ record label, Slampt, during the 1990s and performed in bands during the same period which shared stages with many of the key underground punk groups of the last two decades, including Bikini Kill, Huggy Bear, Fugazi, Q and Not U, Erase Errata, the Ex, Los Crudos, At The Drive In, Quasi, Heavenly, Stereolab, Citizen Fish, Karate, Ninety Day Men, Sweep the Leg Johnny, Submission Hold, Elliot Smith, the Make-Up, Hoover and more. All of the aforementioned bands could be labelled as practitioners within the four case studies I have examined in this thesis, broadly speaking.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Julia Downes, Robert Strachan and Marion Leonard all interviewed me during their PhD research and used my comments to support their findings. Strachan has published some of my comments in his essay ‘Micro-independent Record Labels in the UK: Discourse, DIY Cultural Production and the Music Industry’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/2 (2007), pp.245-265. Downes quotes from me in ‘Riot Grrrl: The Legacy and Contemporary Landscape of DIY Feminist Cultural Activism’ in Monem, Nadine, *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* (London: Black Dog, 2007), pp.12-51: 38. Leonard also offers a lengthy quotation from me in *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock Discourse and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p.120. Also notable is *Crystal Blue Persuasion #4* fanzine, Rachel, Hampshire USA, 2001, which gives an impressively thorough account of the activities of the

When I rely on my personal recollections, however, this does present me with something of a methodological problem. In a sense, the production of this thesis has been an attempt to step back somewhat from a set of traditions in which I have been personally involved. My aim, from the outset of the research, has been to think more critically about the various assumptions made within the scenes, such as the idea that ‘anyone can do it’ to which – as a practitioner – I certainly subscribed. The intention, however, has not been to offer a piece of auto-ethnography as such, since this would require adherence to a fairly strict methodological programme. Rather, as stated, I have aspired to critical distance. At times, however, this has created something of a dilemma. For example, knowing that a writer on riot grrrl considers that a particular record I performed on ‘pin-points very clearly the point where a love of twee [cutie] pop met the punk ethic’, it would seem unhelpful not to expand such a point with further recollections about this crossover of traditions in the present study, particularly since the connection between cutie and punk is a key element I want to emphasise here.⁵⁷ Cazz Blase, who made the claim just quoted, has also suggested that ‘The relationship between punk and riot grrrl is a very under-researched area’.⁵⁸ Hopefully my research here begins to fill this gap by showing not only that riot grrrl was inspired by the cutie scene, and that both of these were perceived at the time by participants as very much part of a larger punk tradition, but also that all traditions in punk have a certain connectedness.

Slampt punk organisation (which I co-ran during the 1990s); the zine is more or less a reproduction of the author’s BA dissertation, in fact. Several other undergraduate and postgraduate students have interviewed me or drawn on my output in the punk underground over the years, and continue to do so.

⁵⁷ Blase, Cazz, ‘Poems on the Underground’ in Monem, *Riot*, pp.50-97: 84.

⁵⁸ Ibid: p.60.

Where possible, therefore, I have relied upon the recollections and opinions of participants other than myself. Where necessary, however, I have introduced elements of auto-biography since the benefit to scholarship on punk/indie/DIY music seems to outweigh any methodological problematics. Where such elements of auto-biography do come into play, I have tried to deploy them reflectively in a manner indebted to approaches recommended in much recent ethnographic scholarship. For example, George Barz and Timothy Cooley have stated that ‘Doing fieldwork, we weave ourselves (or are woven by others) into the communities we study, becoming cultural actors in the very dramas of society we endeavour to understand and vice versa’.⁵⁹ Though I certainly did not consider my participation in the traditions of punk during the 1980s and 1990s as ‘fieldwork’, I believe that my recollections, viewed from my current standpoint as academic researcher, can be treated as such. Given my ‘shadow in the field’ (to use Barz and Cooley’s phrase), then, it should certainly be acknowledged that there are elements of auto-biography here and that these elements are volatile. In view of this, where auto-biography appears I have made an effort to signal it as such.

On a related note, it is worth mentioning that I have relied on non-scholarly sources from the field including fanzines and pieces of journalism. These have been necessary because three of my case studies have received very little coverage in academic work (riot grrrl being the exception, with a significant body of research in the scholarly domain, much of which I draw upon in chapter four below). They have also been

⁵⁹ Barz, Gregory F. and Cooley, Timothy J., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.18.

extremely valuable as sources for understanding the discourses with the punk scene and discourses around it. Fanzines are a particularly useful resource here, for they allow us to see that key players within the cutie scene, for example, explicitly perceived the scene as part of the *punk* tradition, with numerous references to cutie bands as punk rock bands and so on (see chapter three). Journalism from newspapers and other non-academic periodicals add a further dimension, meanwhile, by allowing us to see contemporary and erstwhile opinions on the cases at hand from outside of the micro-scene's own discourse. Methodological implications arise from this of course, since such literature often involves journalistic licence, lack of sourcing, tendentious positions and suchlike. Quotations from fanzines and journalistic sources have been noted as such, therefore, and do not form pivotal elements within the argument except where the pivot is with regard to self-perceptions within a punk micro-scene, on the one hand, and external perceptions within the wider macro-scene of popular music discourse, on the other hand, this difference of perception being crucial to key arguments of the thesis.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ For example, a pivotal argument emerges in chapter four between perceptions of participants with the riot grrrl scene, on the one hand, and of particular journalist commentators outside of the scene, on the other hand. Since the pivot, in this case, is precisely with regard to subjective evaluation and the political implications of the subject's cultural/sub-cultural position, journalistic and vernacular discourses do assume a crucial role within the argument. I have made a significant effort, however, to critique the journalistic account with some scholarly rigour (for example, concrete musical examples to counter the journalists' assertions) and to note that those outside the scene have not found the music under discussion valuable in the way which the insiders have.

Where possible, that said, I have consulted scholarly work on punk and its traditions, of course. Before proceeding to chapter one, therefore, it will be useful to give some detail as to existing literature on the punk field specifically.

Punk Rock, Literally: A Brief Review of Writings on Punk.

As noted, fanzines and similar insider discourses can provide a most useful place for the interested reader to gain an idea of how punks view their own agency. These can still be purchased from record shops such as London's Rough Trade, with the internet obviously now providing an easy opportunity for archive material to be located and examined. For a scholarly account of 'zines' in general, featuring much discussion of the punk underground upon which I focus in this study, see Stephen Duncombe's *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*.

Beyond fanzines, books on 1970s punk are plentiful, although many are limited in scope: as Peter Webb has correctly stated, 'Where most texts on Punk end is where many of the interesting trajectories and developments of Punk began'.⁶¹ However, a thorough overview of the early development of the US punk-related groups is provided by Clinton Heylin's *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*.⁶² Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me* is also a useful and highly entertaining oral history

⁶¹ Webb, Peter, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p.60.

⁶² Heylin, Clinton, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (London: Penguin, 1993).

of the early development of US punk and punk-related groups.⁶³ Accounts of the UK's 'first wave' of punk are most numerous, and often quite repetitious in content. For the casual reader, Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming* is probably the best overview of the period which many people still believe to be *the* punk moment, approximately 1976-8.

The scholarly examination of punk most similar to what I attempt here, ostensibly at least, is Stacy Thompson's *Punk Productions*.⁶⁴ Like Thompson, I examine not only the early punk scenes discussed in the texts just mentioned, but also a range of subsequent punk scenes from more recent decades. Like *Punk Productions*, my research attempts to consider the political aspirations of punk and to interrogate their degrees of legitimacy. Comparably to Thompson again, I bring psychoanalytic theory and other intellectually rigorous perspectives into the discussion. Yet where Thompson relies upon an essentially Marxist analysis (to a fault, I would say), I attempt to consider also the anarchism which punks themselves will so often espouse (though one would hardly realise it from reading *Punk Productions*).⁶⁵ His text, like

⁶³ McNeil, Legs, McCain, Gillian, *Please Kill Me: the Un-censored Oral History of Punk* (London: Penguin, 1997).

⁶⁴ Thompson, Stacy, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

⁶⁵ The fault in question is that, for Thompson, economics determines all. Thus, for example, he presumes that Crass 'wanted to be able to sustain themselves and their commune' by releasing records, which is certainly not the case: their commune at Dial House benefited from an exceptionally low rent and had functioned comfortably for many years without any economic benefits from their label/band (p.88). Thompson interprets Penny Rimbaud's written accounts of the latter's time drumming in Crass as an admission of 'failure' involving 'the band's co-optation into capitalism': in fact, he has never said or written any such thing anywhere (p.92). Rimbaud *has* written extensively about the political and

many academic books on punk, has a problematic tendency towards mastery. For example, Thompson insists that he knows what punk label Dischord is ‘a material signifier of’, specifying that he knows this ‘[r]egardless of their professed intentions’.⁶⁶ It is natural, of course, for a scholar to want to look beneath or behind the assumptions and proclamations of the practitioners whom he or she is researching. Thompson, however, makes claims about and for Dischord which are simply factually inaccurate; again, a problem which occurs in several scholarly accounts of punk.⁶⁷ Finally, it should be noted that *Punk Productions* lacks musicological rigour, often making dubious claims about musical content and rarely delving below the surface of the sonic details.⁶⁸ It is partly due to such failure to observe musical specificities –

philosophical contradictions which Crass wrestled with during their attempts to put anarchy into practice, granted; issues of *leadership* and *solidarity* which I examine carefully in the present study. There is no doubt, however, that he would deny hotly the suggestion that Crass were simply co-opted by capitalism or that they somehow failed in economic terms (for more detail on Crass, see chapter three below).

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Punk Productions*, p.43.

⁶⁷ For example, he claims that Dischord and the D.C. punk scene it represents ‘turned a skeptical eye on the [earlier] English and Californian’ scenes in the early 1980s, where, on the contrary, there is copious evidence that the D.C. punks greatly admired both of these scenes (p.46). He also states that ‘the D.C. Scene’ is characterised by ‘a desire to live within the law’ (p.47). In fact, however, many groups on D.C.’s scene-defining Dischord label had explicitly anti-police songs, such as State of Alert’s ‘Public Defender’, Scream’s ‘Fight/American Justice’ and Red C’s ‘Pressure’s On’, to give just three examples from the first ten songs on the Dischord compilation *Twenty Years of Dischord: Fifty Songs*, double CD, Dischord, DIS 125, 2002. His idea that ‘audience members were not encouraged or allowed to’ stagedive at early 1980s D.C. punk gigs (pp.50-1) is quite wrong: several surviving films of D.C. gigs from that period show that the opposite was the case.

⁶⁸ His definition of the ‘barre chord’, for example, is quite erroneous whilst his definition of ‘riff’ is unorthodox to say the least (p.13). The idea that ‘Riot Grrrl bands achieve a rawer sound than the X-

once more, a seriously common problem in scholarly work on punk – that I have attempted to bring questions of musicality (harmonic structure, rhythm, performance details and so on) firmly in to my research here.

More in touch with the realities of what punk is ‘for itself’ (and in itself, I would argue, indeed) is Dave Laing’s *One Chord Wonders*.⁶⁹ Laing notes carefully the institutional challenge to the dominant record business mounted by the punk rock movement, and gives particular praise to the ultra-DIY scene of home-produced cassette releases, ‘the logical conclusion of the punk idea’.⁷⁰ Given that his study was published in 1985, however, it is fair to say that my work here goes beyond Laing’s at least in the chronological sense: the bulk of my research falls in the years after *One Chord Wonders* was published, whilst Crass and the anarcho-punk movement (my only case study of which Laing could have written) earns only two paragraphs in his book. My political and philosophical enquiries in chapter two are also distinct from

Ray Spex ever did’ is unsubstantiated and very difficult to accept; the singing style of Bikini Kill and X-Ray Spex, for example, is often very similar whilst neither is especially musically polished by conventional rock and pop standards (p.63). It is untrue that ‘Crass adopted a punk sound similar to that of the Sex Pistols’ (p.83). For example, it is easy to see that songs such as ‘Holidays in the Sun’, ‘Anarchy in the UK’ and ‘Pretty Vacant’ rely on extremely rudimentary and familiar harmonic structures (V-IV-iii-ii-I in ‘Holidays’ and ‘Anarchy’ and classic r’n’b-style dominant closures with a chromatic run back up to the tonic in ‘Pretty’). This contrasts strongly with the more intriguing harmonic scheme in the Crass song analysed in chapter three below. Crass’s records are also very under-produced with single tracked guitars and ‘boxy’ drum sounds, whereas the Pistols’ records are highly ‘produced’-sounding with multi-layered guitars and hard rock drumming.

⁶⁹ Laing, Dave, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).

⁷⁰ Laing, *One Chord*, p.118.

his study, as is chapter one's extended interrogation of the idea of punk perhaps being a folk music. Nevertheless, Laing's text is well worth examining, with much that complements my research findings (and vice versa).

For a less music-centred account of where punk may have come from, Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* is a valuable and persuasive argument for the idea that Dada, the Situationist International and the Lettriste International can be seen as precursors to the Sex Pistols and the late 1970s UK punk scene.⁷¹ Marcus's impressive knowledge of and insight into the punk movement has been widely acknowledged, and his *In the Fascist Bathroom* provides a useful if partial view of some significant punk and punk-related music from the 1977-1992 period, showing his impressive foresight with regard to the importance of certain US bands in particular, such as New York's Sonic Youth.⁷²

A more consistent account of the most significant developments in US punk during the 1980s and early 1990s is offered by Gina Arnold in her *Route 666: On the Road to Nirvana*.⁷³ Arnold's re-telling is a little mythic at times, but has the merit of having been the first book-length account of the US underground punk scene, detailing all the most influential bands, record labels and regional scenes of the pre-*Nevermind* era.

Michael Azerrad's subsequent *Our Band Could Be Your Life* gives a little more detail than Arnold's book, but is marred by an insistence that, after Nirvana had reached the

⁷¹ Marcus, Greil, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁷² Marcus, Greil, *In the Fascist Bathroom: Punk in Pop Music 1977-1992*, originally titled as *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁷³ Arnold, Gina, *Route 666: On the Road to Nirvana* (London: Picador, 1993).

top of the album chart in late 1991, it supposedly therefore became impossible for an underground punk scene to continue to exist.⁷⁴ *Route 666*, by contrast, manages to be far more positive about the future of punk. Arnold's follow up book *Kiss This*, though inferior to her earlier tome, is also worth looking at for the reader interested in post-Nirvana punk music, retaining much of the optimism of *Route 666*.⁷⁵

Considering the heavy sloganeering and political rhetoric commonly found in punk, it is perhaps surprising that there has been little written about the political side of this ostensibly anti-establishment movement. Stewart Home's *Cranked Up Really High* does offer some commentary on this dimension, but is inconsistent and rather hysterical at times, though certainly entertaining.⁷⁶ Craig O'Hara's *The Philosophy of Punk* also lacks consistency and, unlike Home, is rather tame in style.⁷⁷ Roger Sabin's essay on 'Rethinking Punk and Racism', meanwhile, promotes a quite extraordinary insistence that those agents from the early punk scene who had flirted with right-wing imagery and ideas, such as Siouxsie Sioux, should not have subsequently revoked their earlier position. This, it seems, is because 'those who re-invented themselves after the fact were simply being dishonest, and were complicit in further clouding our understanding of the punk moment'.⁷⁸ One problem with this,

⁷⁴ Azerrad, Michael, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes From the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (London: Little, Brown and company, 2001); see the epilogue for Azerrad's argument against the possibility for a continued existence of an underground scene.

⁷⁵ Arnold, Gina, *Kiss This: Punk In The Present Tense* (New York: St. Martin's press, 1997).

⁷⁶ Home, Stewart, *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory And Punk Rock* (Hove: Codex, 1995).

⁷⁷ O'Hara, Craig, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!!* (San Francisco: AK, 1995).

⁷⁸ Sabin Roger, "'I Won't Let That Dago By": Rethinking Punk and Racism' in Sabin, Roger, *Punk Rock, So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.199-218: 211.

from the perspective of my research here, is that there is no single ('the') punk moment. Whilst it is reasonable, furthermore, for Sabin to insist that the right-wing undercurrent in early UK punk (which, it should be acknowledged, has had a regrettable persistence ever since) should not be forgotten, there seems little benefit in insisting that a person who has promoted objectionable political views should retain those views for the purpose of some spurious 'historical accuracy' – anyone, after all, can make a mistake.

Also confusing in Sabin's essay is a reference to a 'Hebdigean dialectic'.⁷⁹ Dick Hebdige's classic work on punk, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, remains vital source material for scholarly work on punk, but can hardly be said to be dialectical in its content. There are perhaps grounds for critiquing Hebdige's utilisation of the Lévi-Straussian structuralist concept of *bricolage*, however: indeed, some of my musicological analyses in chapters three and four below are intended to show the likelihood that the performers of this music operate with a high level of consciousness (non-verbal though it may be) when they play 'wrong' notes and dissonant harmonies. I contend, in other words, that punk often involves *deliberate* misuse/re-contextualisation of 'signs', which would thereby make it other than *bricolage* strictly speaking, since the *bricoleur* (in the sense the term is used in structural anthropology) places a sign in a new context with little or no consciousness of its prior meaning/application.

Hebdige's work on punk has also been criticised by Jude Davies in recent years. Davies finds an alleged contribution to 'discourses of mastery' which 'academic

⁷⁹ Sabin, 'Dago', p.205.

authority [has] preserved at a time when it has been problematized not least by its own self-consciousness'.⁸⁰ This aspect of Davies' essay has since been praised by John Charles Goshert. Writing in 2000, Goshert – not wishing to be out-manoeuvred in the critiquing of mastery, perhaps – complains that 'her [sic; Davies is male, in fact] discussion... mostly focus[es] on those that became commercially successful'.⁸¹ Goshert goes some way to redressing this problem by citing several less well-known bands, labels and fanzines from the underground as his exemplars. His cause has since been furthered by twenty-first century work on other underground acts, such as Theodore Matula's interesting examination of the Make-Up's 'reorganization of punk rhetoric' and Alan O'Connor's investigation of three 'local' scenes within the US punk underground, amongst others.⁸² O'Connor recently extended this work with a book length examination of the record labels associated with the punk underground, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy*.⁸³ Also worth looking at, for scholarly work on underground punk, is Emma Baulch's work on Balinese punk and Charles Fairchild's work on Fugazi and the D.C. punk scene.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Davies, Jude, 'The Future of "No Future": Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory', *Journal of Popular Culture* 29/4 (1996), pp.3-25: 3.

⁸¹ Goshert, John Charles, "'Punk" After the Sex Pistols: American Music, Economics, and Politics in the 1980s and 1990s', *Popular Music and Society*, 24/1 (2000), pp.85-106: 85.

⁸² Matula, Theodore, 'Pow To The People!: The Make-Up's Reorganization of Punk Rhetoric', *Popular Music and Society*, 30:1 pp.19-38 (2002); O'Connor, Alan, 'Local Scenes and Dangerous Crossroads: Punk and Theories of Cultural Hybridity', *Popular Music*, 21/2 (2002), pp.225-236.

⁸³ O'Connor, Alan, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY* (Lanham: Lexington, 2008).

⁸⁴ Baulch, Emma, 'Creating a Scene: Balinese Punk's Beginnings', *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 5/2 (2002), pp.153-177; Fairchild, Charles, "'Alternative" Music and the Politics of Cultural Autonomy: The Case of Fugazi and the D.C. scene', *Popular Music and Society*, 19/1 (1995), pp.17-35.

It is an unfortunate fact, however, that some academic writing on punk from recent years has been severely lacking in rigour when it comes to accuracy of detail. It is difficult, for example, to see any sense in Tim Gosling's statement that Rough Trade was an 'exception' to an alleged trend of labels which were 'not as independent as they may have been'.⁸⁵ In fact, Rough Trade's leading instigator Geoff Travis had set up Blanco Y Negro in conjunction with major label WEA as early as 1984 (a significant break with his previous pro-independent position) and would eventually sell even the name Rough Trade to the major-owned One Little Indian label. It is confusing, therefore, that Gosling should appear to attempt to contrast the fate of Rough Trade with Factory Records on the grounds that 'the majors swallowed up' the latter – in fact, this fate befell both labels, and Factory actually managed to survive a year beyond Rough Trade by folding in autumn 1992. Overall, Gosling's understanding of the economic realities of the UK independent scene is weak, hence his failure to consider the fact that US 'anarcho-punk' labels might have been able to survive economically as much because their country, and therefore their market, is considerably bigger. (To describe his case studies, SST, Dischord and Alternative Tentacles, as 'anarcho-punk' is dubious in any case, we should note: though these labels certainly took some inspiration from UK anarcho-punk, there are few agents if any within the punk underground who would so describe these three labels.) UK labels, by contrast, simply have fewer people to sell to – though Southern, the label/distribution with the closest connections to the most well known UK anarcho-

⁸⁵ Gosling, Tim, "'Not For Sale": The Underground Network of Anarcho-Punk' in Bennett, Andy, Peterson, Richard A., *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville: Vanderbilt, 2004), pp.168-179: 172.

punk bands, has managed to survive up to the present day, a fact which Gosling fails to mention.⁸⁶ His statement that Black Flag were one of the ‘notable bands’ on Alternative Tentacles also betrays a lack of rigour in Gosling’s essay: Black Flag released its music through their own SST label, a fact of which one might have expected the author to have been conscious, particularly since SST is one of his case studies.⁸⁷

Literature on punk, then, is varied in quality and reliability; some of the best of it has been produced outside of academe. My research aims to go beyond previous scholarship by attempting to combine a systematic description of the core values espoused by the punk underground with a diachronically broad picture of the kinds of sub-cultural agency which has constituted the scene. In the former respect, I attempt to be more consistent and more rigorous than, for example, O’Hara’s work, which has been widely criticised within the punk scene and beyond, and to be more engaged with punk’s interest in anarchism than Thompson’s study. In respect of the diachronic development of punk, meanwhile, I try to go beyond simply describing the antecedents of 1970s punk (as Heylin has done) or itemizing the significant developments after the ‘first wave’ scene (as Azeradd, Arnold and others have done).

⁸⁶ Southern also played a critical role in the economic survival of Dischord records (again, one of Gosling’s US case studies) in the early 1980s, and have offered economic support to the US label ever since – again rather undermining Gosling’s idea that ‘U.S. anarcho-punk record companies were able to operate in an entrepreneurial manner’ whilst ‘for the UK scene, operating commercial companies was at best a necessary evil’, pp.176-7. Southern has press and radio plugging operations; Dischord, essentially, has none: the latter is, in this and many other respects, *less* entrepreneurial than its UK-based business partner.

⁸⁷ Gosling in Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, p.176.

Instead, I look for structural consistencies in different traditions of punk, and explore the political significance of interruptions to this consistency; arrivals, that is, of what I call the new-sense.

By asking whether it is legitimate to think of punk's traditions and form of political empowerment as having something in common with those of folk music, my research explores a general contrast between rock and folk noted by Simon Frith nearly thirty years ago.⁸⁸ Frith argued that rock (and thus, by implication, punk – which he mentions specifically in his first paragraph) is not 'the folk music of our time... from a sociological point of view'. This is because, where folk 'describes pre-capitalist modes of production, rock is, without a doubt, a mass-produced, mass-consumed commodity'.⁸⁹ The problem, of course, is that so much post-war folk music in fact *also* has been mass-produced and mass-consumed. Certainly some folk music has been minimally-produced and minimally-consumed, has retained certain local characteristics and has idealised pre-capitalised modes of production; but then, so has a lot of punk music from the underground scene.

Such issues remain ripe for serious scholarly examination in the twenty first century, then. Frith, for example, proposed (contrary to the 'myth' he wished to explode) that rock and folk are crucially different consequent to 'how the music is made' more than 'how it works'. In a sense, my research here is an attempt to examine punk (and folk, in fact) from *both* of these angles: how the music is made (from where does it

⁸⁸ Frith, Simon, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free": The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community' in Middleton and Horn, *Popular Music, Volume 1*, pp.159-168.

⁸⁹ Frith, "Magic", p.159.

originate?) *and* how it works (what are the political dimensions of its circulation?).

Given that people are still calling themselves punks more than three decades after the word became internationally familiar as a description of a music scene, it would seem self-evident that punk is not only a tradition but, more accurately, a collection of traditions. Can anyone be a part of this (these) tradition(s)? Can anyone do it? That is the critical question for my research here.

Chapter One: What Is 'It'?

The first purpose of this chapter is to establish a general picture of generally shared principles within the punk tradition(s) which I will be focusing upon in the remainder of the study. In order to further explore the nature of punk *as* a tradition, I go on to show that a similarity between punk and folk has been alleged by many commentators. This similarity is often supposed to be a product of a shared belief that 'anyone can do it'. In order to explore the validity of this supposed similarity, I try to give a general idea of the broad thrust of the post-war folk movement. Uncovering a broadly socialist and often Marxist tendency within folk, I then go on to look at the widely discussed movement of Bob Dylan from acoustic guitar-playing protest singer to electric guitar-wielding rocker in the mid 1960s.

The case of Dylan is revealed to suggest that a certain critical attitude towards the political strategies of the traditional Left may have already begun to arise well before the anarchistic 1970s punk 'explosion'. Dylan's turn to something supposed to be radically new is also shown to have been perceived as politically significant. I explore the politics of Dylan's gesture, setting the ground for the explorations in later chapters of traditions of punk which aim at empowerment through novelty. The present chapter also sets the ground for chapter two's more philosophically rigorous examination of the role of novelty in the politics of empowerment by focusing upon punk's similarities with and differences from deliberately traditional music ('folk').

i. What Is Punk? Style vs. Substance

Together the band and their fans settled the issue and the louts were effectively neutralized. The show continued, the music pounded and screeched. Over and over I kept thinking to myself: ‘Now this is punk’, and for once I didn’t mean it as an insult. It was [as] though I were witnessing the re-incarnation of Darby Crash and the Germs, not in style, but in substance.¹

The year is 1994 and the writer, a notable figure in the US underground music scene of the day, is watching punk begin again, not in style, it would seem, but ‘substance’. The paragraph is rich in clues as to what might constitute this substance: punks are different from louts; punk music pounds and screeches; in punk, band and fans work together; the label ‘punk’, even when applied by someone involved in ‘punk’ (and particularly when that someone’s involvement has been long-held, it often seems), can be an insult. But, as can frequently be found in this ‘movement’, the heart of substance is produced through negation – punk, whatever it may be, is certainly *not* a style (or, at least, not when it amounts to more than a label of ‘insult’).

The writer’s tidy distinction between style and substance is too neat to be accepted by the critical reader. Indeed, the substance of ‘punk’, as far as many casual observers are concerned is (or, as is more often presumed, *was*) precisely that of a fashion and music style. Yet the possibility opened in the paragraph re-produced above that punk could have a substance beyond fashion, music or historicity (the last of these is

¹ Livermore, Lawrence, *Lookout!* fanzine, issue 39, California, USA, 1994, p.24. The band Livermore was watching was Huggy Bear. See chapter four for more detail on this band.

gestured at by the mention of ‘re-incarnation’) is intriguing. If (or rather *when*, for I wish to argue that it has been and continues to be done) punk moves beyond spiky hair, aggressive music and canonisation of a moment or event which, apparently, happened in the UK, late-1970s, what would be (is) left? Furthermore, what changes would cause punk to transgress into a significantly different kind of substance? What elements of punk’s substance might we choose to retain, if we had the choice? Which elements might we reject?

These questions are impossible to even approach without attempting to tame, for discursive purposes, the semantic implication of the word punk. For the purpose of this research, the easiest and most appropriate way to do this is to use a distinction between *underground* and *mainstream*. This distinction is commonly made in the underground itself: the less-prominent scene[s] of bands for whom punk is often claimed to be a matter of substance more than of style. Fans of mainstream punk, by contrast, may not perceive themselves as fans of a *type* of punk music but rather as fans of *the* punk music, generally speaking: the Clash and the Damned at one time, or perhaps Green Day or Blink 182 more recently. The names of the bands aren’t so important, from the point of view of my research here. What is significant is that the audience of such mainstream bands, in bulk, often seem to perceive these acts as punk because of the way they dress and the way they sound.² On the same criteria (music and dress-style), bands perceived as canonical in the underground punk scene, such as

² One example: ‘Punk came through in your music, how you dressed and where you hung out’, Deborah Harry of Blondie, foreword to Blake, Mark, *Punk: The Whole Story* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2008), p.8.

Beat Happening or the later Fugazi, might be appraised by a fan of mainstream punk with the classic put down, ‘that’s not punk’.

The underground punk scene, then, is something which a majority of people would not be aware of; by definition, it is known only to a few. Within the scene’s own discourse, meanwhile, to speak of the punk underground as the diametric opposite of the mainstream is normal. Necessarily, therefore, this diametric opposition is to some extent conditioned by the thing which it opposes. This general point has been hinted at by David Brackett: ‘It is always important to remember the *relational* nature of the mainstream: a concept of the mainstream depends on an equally strong concept of the “margins” – one cannot exist without the other’.³

Brackett’s point here is in fact an extension from Jason Toynbee’s work on ‘mainstreaming’.⁴ Usefully, Toynbee points out the heterogeneity of ‘the’ mainstream, precisely the plurality which agents of the underground often ignore in their eagerness to complain of a supposedly monolithic dominant culture. In the 1980s, it was more common to talk of ‘alternative music’ or the ‘indie scene’, admittedly, but the more recent discursive construction ‘the punk underground’ essentially encapsulates the same crucial idea: *us and them*.⁵ ‘They’ think punk is all

³ Brackett, David, ‘(In Search Of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and Crossover’ in Hesmondhalgh, David, Negus, Keith, *Popular Music Studies* (Arnold: London, 2002), pp.65-83: 69.

⁴ Toynbee, Jason, ‘Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks’ in Hesmondhalgh and Negus, 2002, pp.149-164.

⁵ Kaya Oakes has expressed amazement that her students who ‘identified as indie rock fans’ were unfamiliar with ‘Minor Threat, Black Flag, the Minutemen, or Hüsker Dü’ (*Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* (New York: Holt, 2009), p.11). Since these bands are more often than

about wearing leather jackets and jumping about on Top of the Pops, but ‘we’ know punks are vegetarians who don’t sign to major labels.

This ‘we’ would perceive punk as an attitude, as a ‘substance’ rather than a style, ostensibly at least. It would be erroneous, however, to state that all agents (‘fans’, band members and so on) within the underground conceive of punk as an ideological *modus operandi* more than as a style of music. Certainly there are many within the scene who ‘just like the records’ (and these, we should note, are as likely as mainstream fans are to complain ‘that’s not punk’ with regard to musical style). Yet a large constituency within the punk underground consider there to be certain fundamental *operational* principles at stake; indeed, the majority probably consider this underground punk to be about something more than music. It is this constituency, in whose eyes punk is supposed to have a political and perhaps even ideological character, which I intend to identify as ‘underground’ for the purposes of this research.⁶ What, for this constituency, *is* punk? Any answer to this can only be general, for it is certain that not all those who would call themselves ‘underground punk rockers’ will in fact share the same views on all things (‘the’ underground, in

not known as *punk* bands, one can see here how closely ‘indie’ is associated with punk. The same compound is produced when she refers to Tim Yohannan, editor of the punk bible *Maximum Rock’n’Roll* fanzine, as ‘an indie Renaissance man’ (p.65). I would argue that Oakes’s linkage of indie and punk is well-founded, though some sub-cultural antagonisms are certainly sometimes observable between punks and ‘indie kids’.

⁶ By ideological here, I simply mean that some within the underground consider punk to be ‘a body of ideas characteristic of [their] particular social group’, to adapt the second of Terry Eagleton’s taxonomy of sixteen ‘definitions of ideology currently in circulation’, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), pp.1-2.

other words, is as plural as the mainstream; more so, it is fair to presume, though Brackett's and Toynbee's observations are certainly pertinent here). Yet be it the anarcho-punks of the late 1970s/early 1980s, the UK's 'cutie indie kids' of the mid-to-late 1980s (see chapter three), or the riot grrrls and math rockers of the 1990s (see chapter four), or any other tradition of underground punk, there *is* a certain general sense of what punk is. This sense is primarily constructed on a sense of alterity from the mainstream (including mainstream punk), as noted. This has five principal features, which I have ascertained by reading several dozens of books on punk (Arnold and Duncombe are perhaps the best texts for the casual reader interested in the principles of the punk underground I have summarised here), hundreds of fanzines and countless conversations with agents within the scene over a twenty five year period⁷:

- i) Mainstream punk music is released by major labels; underground punk has been instigated and maintained as an independent network.
- ii) Mainstream punk is hierarchical in the sense that it replicates the kind of competitiveness (for record sales, for 'billing' in performance, etc.) of the music industry's conventional rock and pop systems; underground punk calls for no heroes and no leaders.⁸ This can be attempted on a variety of

⁷ To some extent, therefore, there is an element of auto-biographical research here, then, but my findings are backed up by copious literature available elsewhere, I should add.

⁸ Thus one of the most important punk underground labels of the last twenty years is named *Kill Rock Stars* whilst one of the most important early punk bands on a DIY label, Stiff Little Fingers, named one of their most anthemic songs 'Nobody's Heroes'. Punk's most vehement resistance to leadership in punk comes from Crass, it is fair to say, more detail on whom is available in chapter three below. Stiff Little Fingers, 'Nobody's Heroes', *All The Best*, Chrysalis, CTY 1414, 1983.

levels, such as: printing the names of bands in a similar size of lettering on posters; ‘trading’ records instead of selling them⁹; allowing ‘out-of-town’ bands top-billing at a gig where the local bands have in fact drawn most of the crowd; and so on. By contrast, competitiveness is, overwhelmingly, presumed to be normal and necessary in the mainstream.

- iii) Mainstream punk bands have achieved enough musical competence to attain record sales sufficient to allow them to be described as ‘mainstream’; underground punk bands often pride themselves on the very ‘uncommerciality’ of their ‘difficult’ music and may seem as if they ‘cannot play’ or sound ‘unprofessional’ or too ‘lo-fi’ to the mainstream music-consumer. In a nutshell, the fact that most people walk out of a gig performance might be deemed, by some underground bands, as some form of evidence of success; the same could not apply to a band which aspires to assimilation into the mainstream.
- iv) Mainstream punk music follows familiar patterns of musical content, for commercial reasons; underground punk disturbs convention and provides a ‘cutting edge’, and therefore is inherently uncommercial.
- v) Mainstream punk bands merely gesture at radicalism and politicisation (if they show any overt interest in politics at all); underground punk articulates extreme political views with action, within performance and sometimes more broadly.

⁹ The ‘trade’ might involve a record-for-record swap between two bands who happen to have found themselves on the same bill, or (for larger quantities) between two record labels who will then retail each other’s goods. Symbolically at least, this obviously goes against the music industry’s (and its bands’) normal tendencies towards competitiveness.

These five elements of difference from the mainstream would not necessarily all be adhered to by the full range of individuals and sub-groups which identify themselves as part of an ‘underground’, as noted. Most agents within the scene[s], nevertheless, can be found to echo most or all of the sentiments typified above.¹⁰ As is well known, punk has often associated itself with anarchy and anarchism. The five points listed here reflect a desire within this self-identified underground to put anarchist rhetoric into practice. To what extent, we should therefore want to ask, can the five points of alleged difference hold up against critical scrutiny? Let us scrutinise them point by point, with some supporting evidence here in anticipation of the extended case studies of chapters three and four:

- i) Given that independent labels, so central to the history of punk after its first wave, have never disappeared and still exist today, there can be little argument over this element. Indeed, despite increasing economic adversity for both larger and smaller independent labels during the 1990s, in the twenty first century technology has made it easier than ever for a ‘punk’ or, for that matter, any other music-maker to record, package, promote and release their own CDs. If a music-maker is content to sell a small quantity of a release, as has been long-accepted practice in the underground, it has probably never been easier than it is today. At the same time, it should be

¹⁰ This will become evident in the case studies of chapter three and four herein but is also apparent in many of the texts already mentioned in the introduction to the present thesis, especially Arnold’s *Route 666* and Duncombe’s *Zines*. I can also report, auto-biographically, that I have found this to be the case in my years of participation in the punk underground.

acknowledged that many labels which *appear* to be independent, and which are often described as ‘indie’ in vernacular discourse, are in fact connected to major labels through production and distribution arrangements (‘p & d deals’), funding via share-holding and other covert forms of economic support. Such labels are sometimes called ‘schmindie’ labels.¹¹

- ii) Though it is true that the underground scene is, in general but discernible ways, less hierarchical than the mainstream music industry, hierarchy lingers inevitably. For example, when each band on a poster has its name printed in the same-sized font, one must still appear at the top; the top-of-the-bill slot, even if given, for example, to an ‘out-of-town’ band (who might not be awarded such a privilege in a mainstream gig where the audience ‘draw’ is always the decisive billing factor) remains a hierarchically-desirable position nevertheless (otherwise it could not be a privilege, obviously); and so on. Hierarchy in the gig setting is an interesting inevitability, nevertheless, for the *dynamic* of the audience/performer relationship is notably different in the underground: an audience member might call out words of encouragement, or indeed might ‘heckle’, with greater influence upon the flow of the event than could be

¹¹ For more reading on the subject of the independent music scene’s assimilation by the majors, see Hesmondhalgh, ‘Indie’; Hesmondhalgh, David, ‘Post-punk’s attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade’, *Popular Music* 16/3 (1997), pp.255-74; Lee, Stephen, ‘Re-examining The Concept of the “Independent” Record Company: The Case of Wax Trax! Records’, *Popular music* 14/1 (1995), pp.13-31. For my critical engagement with these texts, see Dale, Pete, *Incorporation and Resistance: A Study of the Mainstreamisation of Punk in the Early 1990s*, MA thesis, Newcastle University, 2005.

achieved by an attendee of, for example, a stadium rock gig. Overall, though, if punk's presumed ability to 'break down the barrier between the audience and the band' were achieved in any absolute sense, there could no longer be an audience; indeed, even if all present were holding instruments (or, failing that, producing intentionally-musical sounds of some description, eg. singing, tapping, etc.), absolute removal of hierarchy would also, presumably, require the individuals in the room to stand in some form of carefully-measured circle, to play at the same volume, to play for the same duration, etc. Elements of hierarchy will always be residual in a musical performance, in other words, but it remains fair to say that underground punk gigs are overwhelmingly less hierarchical than the performance environment of mainstream rock and pop.

- iii) This claim of difference between underground and mainstream is easily challengeable. The Sex Pistols are an exemplary case: the band 'couldn't play' (as far as its contemporary audiences were often concerned), deliberately alienated attenders of its gigs, was thoroughly 'unprofessional' in the context of the time, and so on, yet produced hit records nevertheless.¹² Meanwhile a group such as Slint, who strongly regarded themselves and are regarded by others as a part of the punk underground, have displayed most impressive musicianship and would certainly not normally be considered 'lo-fi' or unprofessional in their

¹² The Sex Pistols had several hit records including a number two hit, 'God Save The Queen', which it is widely argued would have reached the top of the charts if not for 'fixing' designed, it has been suggested, to save face for the Royal Family in the week of Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee, 1977 (Sex Pistols, 'God Save The Queen', *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, CD, Virgin, CDVX2086, 1987).

sound.¹³ Furthermore, underground groups such as the industrial-noise outfit Whitehouse, which have deliberately confronted audiences in the most extreme ways, do nevertheless retain a small but notable ‘fanbase’ consisting of like-minded ‘noise-addicts’.¹⁴ If the underground/mainstream distinction on grounds of an approach to performance and musicianship consists only of a difference in terms of audience size, the distinction would certainly be weak: any given performer will always have peers with larger audiences and others with smaller ones, after all, so the distinction is clearly arbitrary. However, a more subtle level of distinction can be uncovered. For one thing, the ‘fan’ of industrial noise is most often also a *producer* of such music, with trading of self-produced cassettes and,

¹³ Dave Pajo of Slint told me of this self-image himself in an informal conversation in the late-1990s, citing Minor Threat and the Ramones as two bands whom he personally had felt inspired by (I am using an element of auto-biography in giving this information, of course). Slint’s records were released by the punk-orientated independent label Touch and Go. See chapter four below for more consideration of this issue of complex musicality in 1990s punk music.

¹⁴ A local incident in Newcastle upon Tyne, where this research has been undertaken, demonstrates Whitehouse’s extent of audience confrontation. In the early 1980s, the group played the Morden Tower performance space which had been used for poetry readings since the 1960s and managed to cause so much outrage that the space was not available for live music for more than ten years afterwards. Eye-witness accounts vary, but all those I have spoken to who were present agree that, for reasons which are not entirely clear, a member of the group physically assaulted a woman of colour in the audience. Simon Reynolds’ discussion of Whitehouse suggests that similar incidents were the norm rather than the exception (*Rip*, pp.240-1). This has not prevented the band from retaining an on-going ‘fanbase’, however – indeed the group played to a reportedly fair-sized crowd at Newcastle’s Cumberland Arms in the late-1990s, despite their much-discussed previous performance which many seem to view as having constituted a racist assault.

latterly, CD-Rs being the cornerstone of this particular branch of the punk-descended underground scene. Particularly strong in the noise scene, this tendency of audience members to be concurrently active as musicians, ‘zine’-writers, gig-promoters and the like is found throughout the underground. It is probably fair to presume, on the other hand, that only a tiny minority of the millions who have bought, for example, Green Day albums in recent years have actually themselves performed with a band in front of an audience (or organised a gig, etc.). Furthermore, although the Sex Pistols exemplify the possibility for a seemingly ‘uncommercial’ band to nevertheless sell a lot of records, the distinctive thing about the underground is that a band can sell very few records and still be a ‘success’ in the sense of gaining the admiration of an audience. Whether or not the latter phenomenon constitutes a process sometimes described as ‘indie elitism’ (wherein the relative obscurity of a band’s renown actually provides a certain cultural capital), there are clear grounds to this extent for accepting that the underground contains tendencies distinct from the mainstream in this respect.

- iv) The question of challenging versus conventional musical content is intimately linked to point iii)’s claimed binarism between musical professionalism in the mainstream against the underground’s amateur musicianship. The separation of the two points remains necessary, nevertheless. This is due to the *mechanism* by which the mainstream, in practice, has always absorbed challenging (unfamiliar, that is, but also, of course, challenging in the sense of being a *threat to sales*) music from the margins. This mechanism is well-known and has been widely discussed in

both vernacular and academic discourse.¹⁵ Since the process has reaped huge profits for the majors time and time again, the underground's claim to difference from the mainstream in terms of musical *content* must always be collapsible. In some cases – the rise of free jazz from the mid-1960s, say – the majors are quite happy to leave an area of cutting edge music to the minority-taste driven independent sector. At other times, what appears to be challenging music is quickly assimilated before either being cast off, if it fails to sell in significant quantities, or fully assimilated as a new orthodoxy of musical acceptability: the months immediately posterior to Nirvana's sudden commercial success in late 1991, for example, are a case in which major labels signed dissonant 'noise' groups such as Helmet as well as lo-fi, 'outsider' music from the likes of Daniel Johnston only to quickly relinquish that which they had temporarily assimilated. Due to the mechanism in question, there is in principle no music which would be impossible for the mainstream to co-opt, as has been proven repeatedly in practice.

- v) The obvious objection to this idea is that some mainstream bands have appeared to extend their political allegiances beyond rhetorical sloganeering. Examples include Chumbawamba (ex-agents of the punk underground, in fact) and Rage Against The Machine, who have donated significant sums of money to anarchistic and 'Hard Left' causes whilst signed to mainstream major labels. The normal argument from the underground perspective against this is that groups such as Chumbawamba

¹⁵ For a succinct description of the mechanism, see Chanan, Michael, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 1995), pp.99-100.

and Rage Against The Machine cannot effectively work against a 'system' which is simultaneously paying their wages. The capitalist system can hardly be wished away, however, and it is fair to point out that even the most ardent anarcho-punk bands act within that system also (the records, that is, are manufactured from plastic, with the use of poorly-remunerated factory labourers, before being distributed by gas-guzzling vehicles, despite the bands' ostensible commitment to environmental and social concerns). On the other hand, anarcho-punk bands such as Crass in particular 'politicised' a huge body of people in the early 1980s, stimulating significant anti-establishment agency (see chapter three for more detail); Rage Against The Machine, by contrast, stimulated little more than dancing at 'alternative' discos and generated far more profit for Sony than they ever donated to, say, the Mexican Zapatistas. It is probably fair, therefore, to state as a general observation that there is an overwhelmingly stronger connection between politically-motivated rhetoric and agency in the underground than exists in the mainstream. Nevertheless, questions of difference between underground and mainstream in terms of counter-hegemonic efficacy are complex and should not be foreclosed prematurely; on the contrary, the issue is critical and will be considered in detail in the second half of the next chapter in particular.

It is clear, then, that none of these five elements of alleged difference between underground and mainstream can be said to be 'hard and fast'. There are plenty of examples of underground bands with little or no interest in politics, or who play music

with decidedly unchallenging content, or who perform with great musical dexterity, or who will complain about their position in the running order of a gig. No agency in a capitalist system can entirely escape the structure of that paradigm, and the ‘independent label’ is inevitably to some extent a discursive construct.¹⁶

Yet clearly there are some genuine differences between the underground and the mainstream, though they may not be absolute. These can be summarised essentially as differences of *operational tendency*. Hierarchy is residual in the underground punk scene, for the structure of performer and audience is inescapably hierarchical *per se*. Yet the hierarchy is also fundamentally different in character and in scale between a stadium rock gig, on the one hand, and a gig in a pub back-room, on the other. The underground scene exists within the capitalist system, yet operates in strongly contrasting ways from the dominant economic operationality. The tendency, in the underground, is towards covering costs, with many DIY indie labels operating as a hobbyist ‘labour of love’. In the mainstream music industry, the tendency is obviously towards maximisation of profits: it is impossible to imagine a major label justifying a loss-making project purely on the grounds that the music is good. Such attitudes are routine in the underground, by contrast, and constitute the underground’s operational tendency.

¹⁶ This is not to say that an independent label cannot point towards possible alternative paradigms; on the contrary, I would argue that it can and usually does. I would not argue, in other words, that the ‘indie’ scene is necessarily only a micro-capitalist realm of symbolic rebellion: such labels and bands and so on can be anti-capitalist in as significant a sense as anything can, in fact. The point I would stress here is that it is naïve to imagine the ‘independence’ of the indie scene to be a currently achieved absolute: it is, rather, an ideal which perhaps we can glimpse or, perhaps, we could fully establish, but either way, it is not ‘here’ today. This crucial issue will be considered at length in chapter two below.

In terms of the question as to whether ‘anyone can do it’, the most important contrast of operational tendency between underground and mainstream is that of professionalism versus amateurism. This tendency pervades all five of the points of differentiation listed above, since punk-orientated independent labels are invariably instigated by individuals with little or no business acumen. The strongest operational tendency towards amateurism lies at the level of musical performance. Over and over, in punk, a rhetorical insistence is repeated: anyone, they say, can do it. But what is ‘it’?

Business or Pleasure: Amateurs vs. Professionals

Punk wasn't a musical style, or at least it shouldn't have been... It was more a kind of ‘do it yourself – anyone can do it’ attitude. If you can only play two notes on the guitar you can figure out a way to make a song out of that.¹⁷

The term punk was first applied, as a descriptor of music, to certain ‘garage’ bands of the 1960s such as the Standells, the Sonics and the Seeds. This was prior to and essentially separate from the eruption of ‘the punk movement’ as it is normally understood, which developed in the mid-1970s in both the UK and, in a different but comparable way, in the US around the same time. The degree of transatlantic influence between UK and US developments of ‘punk’ music is moot and hotly contested but, for the purpose of convenience in most of this study, the UK and US developments of the mid-1970s are compounded as the ‘first wave’ of punk, in

¹⁷ Bennett, *Cultures*, p.60, quote attributed to David ‘Bryne’ (sic) of Talking Heads.

keeping with most vernacular discourse. This first wave is normally understood as the 1976-8 period when punk rock became an internationally familiar term.

Beyond the nominal connection, the similarity between the 60s garage punk bands and the 70s punk rock groups is that, overwhelmingly, the music produced was utterly basic. '96 Tears' by ? and the Mysterions is as good an example of 60s punk as any: a basic beat, repetitive structure and a hypnotically simple keyboard part. It is not that the record lacks appeal; on the contrary, it retains great cult popularity today and has been 'covered' many times over the last four decades. It could hardly be denied, however, that the performance sounds as if it might have been delivered by players with very little instrumental prowess. 70s punk, likewise, stripped rock down to the most basic features and hammered them out with lashings of energy but very little in the way of subtlety.

This, of course, puts such groups very much in line with a longer pedigree of rock music, and consciously so. The 60s US garage bands, reputedly influenced to some extent by the 'British Invasion' groups (the Beatles and Stones et al), were going back to the roots of rock'n'roll: Chuck Berry, Elvis, Bo Diddley and so on. Yet it is interesting to note that, for example, Bo Diddley (one of the key architects of early rock'n'roll) had first learned the violin as a youth. Jimmy Page, meanwhile, who performed the brutally basic guitar parts on early recordings by crucial British Invasion groups such as the Who and the Kinks, turned out to have an impressive

musical dexterity.¹⁸ Likewise, many punk and indie musicians from the 1970s onwards performed in a more simple style than that of which they were capable. This is reflected in comments from the Smiths' Johnny Marr (regarded by many as the greatest guitarist of the 1980s post-punk indie/alternative scene): on a particular track, Marr 'wanted it to sound like a punk player who couldn't play', despite his well-known ability as a guitarist.¹⁹

In rock generally, then, and certainly in punk, an apparent 'amateurishness' often belies a masked musical proficiency (seemingly in some form of resistance to the exceptional virtuosity of many progressive rock and heavy metal musicians²⁰). A classic example is 'Boredom', the lead track from the first Buzzcocks' EP *Spiral Scratch*.²¹ After a rhythm guitar has set out a basic sequence of bar-chords, a second guitar plays a lead part based on only two notes (the tonic and fifth) repeated *ad*

¹⁸ Shel Talmy, the producer behind the Kinks' 'You Really Got Me' and the Who's 'Can't Explain', used Jimmy Page for sessions by these and other significant 1960s groups. Page's subsequent work in Led Zeppelin has earned him a reputation as a virtuoso rock guitarist.

¹⁹ Goddard, Simon, *The Smiths: The Songs That Saved Your Life* (London: Reynolds and Hearn, 2004), p.237, discussing their 1987 recording 'Stop Me If You Think You've Heard This One Before' (*Strangeways Here We Come*, CD, Rough Trade, ROUGH CD 106, 1987).

²⁰ Regarding the desire amongst heavy metal musicians for virtuosic playing ability, see Walser, Robert, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal music* (California: Wesleyan University Press, 1993). That first wave punk was resistant to progressive rock is almost universally accepted. It is worth noting, that said, that heavy metal became less widely perceived as the antithesis of punk after the rise of Sub Pop in the late 1980s, and even more so after Nirvana's fame in the 1990s. For more on virtuosity and 1990s punk, see chapter four below. For more on the sometimes-blurry distinction between amateurs and professionals, see Finnegan, *The Hidden*, pp.12-8.

²¹ Buzzcocks, 'Boredom', *Spiral Scratch* EP, New Hormones, ORG-1, 1977.

absurdum in the manner of a police siren. The two-note pattern returns several times during the song, as if to emphasise the message of the song's title, and giving the impression that the band can hardly play. Yet the same 'riff' appears on the band's debut album, recorded shortly thereafter, with some distinctly more technically advanced development on this two-note guitar theme (hammer-ons, scalar runs and such like). It is possible that Buzzcocks' guitarist Pete Shelley advanced his guitar playing abilities in the intervening months, one supposes. Given the glee with which Shelley cries 'tricky guitar solo!' in a live clip broadcast on television around the same time, however, it seems more likely that amateurism, here, was performed for effect rather than through necessity. The guitar solo in question appears in one of the band's most-loved numbers, 'What Do I Get'. Like 'Boredom' it is based primarily on two notes, though the guitarist does add a third note twice during his 'break'; it is, in other words, far from tricky.

Yet if 70s punk rock, in particular, was rich in irony and certainly involved some pretence of incompetence, it also fostered an impressive amount of genuinely untutored and spontaneous musicianship. The Mekons, Dutch anarchistic group the Ex and many other bands which formed towards the end of the 1970s have claimed that they decided to start bands and *then* decided who would play which instruments – by literally 'drawing lots', in some cases. These two bands, the Ex and the Mekons, indeed, are interesting cases precisely because one can hear the acquisition of instrumental technique developing over a sequence of their early records. Though their successful development as they improved their instrumental control (both have been performing and releasing records ever since and continue to do so at the present

time) is the exception rather than the rule, it is well-known that punk encouraged many, many individuals to form bands, and continues to do so.²²

An important question here, however, is as to whether a degree of inverted snobbery has been involved in the punk movement. How far, for example, does the ‘anyone can do it’ ethos espoused by much of the punk underground extend to those who might have attained greater skill on an instrument and who might therefore prefer to play in a more technically advanced manner? As will become clear in chapter four, criticism of the ‘muso’ (a derogatory term for individuals perceived to display excessive interest in the minutiae of music) is less likely in more recent years than it might have been in earlier years within the punk underground. Nevertheless, there remains an overall and on-going suspicion of ‘excessive’ musicianship, I would argue.²³ Why should this be the case? The prejudice, I would suggest, is founded on certain essentially structuralist presumptions about which more detail will be given in chapter two. For now we can note that, at heart, the insistence upon basic musicianship is predicated upon two main prejudices: firstly, a sense that the novice has a greater

²² More common, amongst punk fans, than the praise for the musicality developed by the Ex and the Mekons would be the complaint that such-and-such band are not as good ‘now they’ve learned to play’. One example would be 1990s Ramones-inspired group the Donnas, whose basic-sounding first LP was claimed to be superior to their later, more ‘produced’-sounding records in the opinion of fans I spoke to when my band was sharing a stage with the Donnas in San Francisco, 1999 (*The Donnas*, LP, Lookout, LK191, 1998).

²³ One can often hear players and fans from the punk milieu (and beyond, come to that) complaining of ‘musos’ whose excess of technique detracts from the basic impact of the music. This general sentiment goes back at least to Chuck Berry’s classic ‘Rock and Roll Music’, with its complaint of ‘modern jazz’ musicians who ‘try to play it too darned fast and lose the beauty of the melody’ to the extent that ‘they got it sounding like a symphony’.

likelihood of achieving originality and, secondly, that advanced musicianship equates with what we can call professionalisation.

The first of these presumptions will be considered in detail in the next chapter, but it should be clear, even at a glance, that not all seemingly-‘original’ creativity comes from novice artists. To equate originality with novelty, therefore, is a decidedly vulgar way to conceive of creativity. The untrained artist certainly might display great expressivity. This quality might seem less noticeable as the artist gains technical skill, in many cases. But to insist that the mysterious ingredient of expressiveness must always disappear once technical skill has been gained would be to de-value art entirely: for which artist is truly and entirely devoid of skill?

More intriguing, in a chapter which wants to consider what punk is (or might be), is the question of professionalisation. A first and important point to make, in this regard, is that punk – perhaps more than any other form of music – has allowed performers with extraordinarily low levels of instrumental prowess to effectively become professionals. At the top of the mainstream, for example, U2 (whose early inspiration from musically basic punk-orientated bands such as Joy Division is well known) have become rich despite the limitations of the band’s three instrumentalists.²⁴ Within punk’s underground ‘bubble’, meanwhile, it seems to be the case that even ostensibly

²⁴ This is not to say that the band is without any musicianly skill: on the contrary, drummer Larry Mullen demonstrates some idiosyncratic and impressive hi-hat/snare work on the intro of ‘Sunday, Bloody Sunday’, for example, and guitarist The Edge makes good use of a guitar in which one suspects he has had little if any formal training. Compared with the average ‘pub covers band’, however, it is likely that U2 would compare unfavourably in terms of versatility and the ability to apply harmonic knowledge to differing styles of music.

pro-anarchist groups such as Conflict and the Subhumans have become somewhat professionalised in the sense that touring and making records has been their principal work for many, many years. Calvin Johnson, legendary main-player in the band Beat Happening and the label K records, appears to know only three or four chords on the guitar and releases ostensibly ‘uncommercial’ music on his label, yet he has been able to make punk his occupation for several decades. In the short term, the punk underground has provided jobs for many: booking agents, gig promoters, label runners, musicians, soundpersons and so on; provided the individuals in question are willing to work long and hard for little pay, that is.

Yet such individuals remain amateurs, in a certain sense, because what they do they do for *love* (the root of the word amateur, of course). Some from the underground have gone on to become millionaires, admittedly: Green Day, for example, or Lawrence Livermore (ex-boss of Lookout!, the DIY label which issued the first two Green Day albums). Such cases are so exceptional as to be barely worth mentioning, however, for the punk/alternative section of the average record shop is filled with discs which it is virtually impossible to imagine selling in five figure quantities let alone in the millions. The underground, in general, is peopled by those who are passionate about punk-orientated music: the amateurs who would continue making and listening to such music regardless of financial gain or, more often, loss. (The latter case would raise the question, perhaps, as to whether the underground punker, should they be using music-making as a relief from the drudge of work, is in fact seeking refuge from capitalism.²⁵)

²⁵ Zine writers will very often complain about their jobs, and claim their fanzines make their lives worth living. Very similar sentiments can be heard from the mass of musicians in the underground

A problem with this attempted challenge to professionalisation is that the punk underground has tended to confuse amateurism in the sense of (a particular style of) basic musicianship with amateurism in the sense of playing music for the love of it. When this logic is followed, the punk fan can become rather fascistic, frankly: only one type of music is acceptable, and no-one must make any money out of it (all money made from gigs, records and so on, according to certain voices in the punk underground, must go directly back in to 'the scene'). One of the most notorious and prominent voices espousing such a belief is Tim Yohannon, long-term editor of the once very influential *Maximum Rock'n'Roll* fanzine. More can be read about his views in chapter four below, but the problem with the general trajectory of his argument should be obvious: if no compromise can be allowed between the strict idea of amateurism as entirely unpaid agency and the antithetical idea of the professional as being entirely devoid of enthusiasm for the product, how is a punk rock band to eat?

In practice, touring punk bands in Europe and North America often live from their music. Intense hardcore group Drop Dead told me, in 1998, that they had just toured for six months straight across the two continents, lived from their earnings whilst on the road, and then come home with virtually no money to show for their efforts. There was nothing to indicate this informant felt any regret about this except, it seemed, that

punk scene, furthermore. To that extent, they have much in common with the working class people whom Hoggart wrote of in the 1950s, who would sing songs to help their emotional survival during 'the unsentimental ordinariness of the working week', Hoggart, Richard, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), p.166.

he now had to find a 'McJob' until the next tour. It is clear, however, that capitalism impinged on Drop Dead in several respects: the daily dose of petrol for a touring underground punk band is evidence enough of that. Drop Dead, in a certain sense, were professional musicians at this time, then.

The aspiration that punk should entirely divorce from the mainstream economy is an always already failed project. An auto-biographical anecdote may emphasise this point. During the 1990s, when I was co-running a record label and fanzine both of which had an explicit and strongly voiced anti-corporate, anti-major, anarchistic ethos, I used to tour with my band Red Monkey for months on end, playing in squats around Europe and all manner of peculiar and interesting locations in North America. In between tours, since the label produced very limited profits from its releases, I would often work part-time for a prominent British chain bookstore. When the chain was taken over by HMV Media Group in 1997, which is owned by EMI, I found myself in a very uncomfortable situation, therefore. This story is told for its obvious relevance, but it is worth also stating that I have found such uncomfortable compromises to be common amongst political punk bands, labels and fanzines: one must have food and shelter, after all.

For the stoical individual, however, touring punk-style has many positive aspects. It is, overall, a compromise between amateurism and professionalisation, but it is a compromise which has allowed many more individuals to travel and play music than otherwise might have been able to. This tendency towards inclusivity has led many to compare punk with folk music. (It is also the case, of course, that this inclusivity of 'basic' musicianship links punk firmly with the longer tradition of rock, rock'n'roll,

skiffle and so on, thus undermining the idea of late 1970s punk as a ‘year zero’ moment.²⁶) It is worth exploring this supposed similarity in order to perhaps ascertain a clearer picture of how punk’s tradition(s) compare to a more obviously traditional music, especially in political terms.

Section Summary

Within punk, a large constituency identifies itself as ‘the underground’ and would like to thereby distinguish itself from the mainstream. This separation can be problematised but retains strongly identifiable elements of difference nevertheless, with a distinctly anarchistic undercurrent in the underground. These differences often balance upon operational tendency, a tendency towards financial independence and inclusivity. The latter is often supported by an explicit encouragement of amateurs, yet this encouragement has limits, on the one hand because limitations upon punk’s musicianship are sometimes deliberately performed rather than being a product of

²⁶ Though my concern in the present chapter is primarily to explore and interrogate the evidently common belief that punk is somehow similar to folk, rather than to make more general observations about popular music aesthetics *tout court*, it is worth mention here that there is of course a huge amount of literature on the latter issue. A good, concise source for reading with regard to this is Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially his section ‘The Value Problem in Cultural Studies’, pp.3-20. Frith challenges the sweeping critiques of, for example, Allan Bloom and the pessimism about popular music of the Frankfurt school, before going on to discuss the defensive approach of ‘the cultural studies tradition with which I am most familiar, British subcultural theory’ and its attempt to construct a model of ‘positive mass consumption’, p.13. In a few short pages he thus frames neatly a very large literature. Toynbee’s *Making Popular Music* also offers a number of useful explorations of the role and nature of aesthetics in popular music.

actual technical incompetence (eg. in the case of the Buzzcocks), and on the other hand because capitalism cannot simply be wished away and, in practice, will impact in identifiable ways upon even the most anarchistic of bands.

ii. Traditional Music: The Folk ‘Us’

Structurally, there isn't a whole lot of difference between some punk music and folk music – three chords, verse and chorus. But punk music is performance-oriented and does not lend itself to any sort of significant interaction, whereas folk/country can be taken outside the performance and into an exchange. You can sit down and learn a song in fifteen minutes, and spend the rest of your life adapting and skewing it.²⁷

The proposition is interesting. Punk and folk are similar structurally, in the sense that both are primarily based on functional tonality ('three chords') and traditional verse/chorus segments. Yet though both involve performance, folk music also allows 'exchange'. Punk music, on the other hand, lacks such 'significant interaction'. This element of difference (exchange versus limited levels of interaction) rests at least partly upon degrees of musical innovation: folk can be adapted and skewed in subtle ways over the course of a lifetime whereas punk, presumably, requires a desire for radical novelty ('rip it up and start again', to quote a song which has been delimited as 'postpunk' by at least one commentator).²⁸ Punk, by implication, is less suitable for adaptation; you can sit down and *write* a punk song in fifteen minutes, maybe, but you don't 'learn' punk, perhaps we can surmise.

²⁷ Andy Sheie quoted in Farseth, Erik, *Wipe Away My Eyes: Underground Culture and Politics* (Minneapolis: Abandoned House, 2001), p.166.

²⁸ Reynolds, Simon, *Rip It Up And Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber, 2005).

This idea that punk is a type of folk music is not especially uncommon. Even the ultra-fast, aggressive and loud ‘hardcore’ style, which might at a glance appear the opposite of the typically gentle acoustic music of the folk scene, has been alleged to hold an interesting similarity:

For me, Hardcore is Folk Music. As an amateur musicologist, I can watch a young band play and know what they’re gonna do because they’re following the form. When they play those bar chords a certain way or go back to that repeated chorus – this is Folk terminology being passed down the line. This made us into this cohesive group of people that shared something private that made us, in our minds, better than everybody else.²⁹

The last idea, of empowerment through membership of a private, cohesive sub-cultural group, is of course problematic and I consider it at length in chapter two below. The argument for the musical details of punk being disseminated through a folk-like ‘being passed down the line’ process, on the other hand, would seem to be good sense and is supported by much (though not all) of the analysis in chapters three and four below. The same point is made by Ramsey Kanaan of Political Asylum (and later of anarchist publishers AK Press):

We were always happy to rip off tunes from any one, any where, any time... If one listens not too closely, you can hear [in the music of Political Asylum] bits

²⁹ Ed Ivey of Rhythm Pigs quoted in Blush, Steven, *American Hardcore: A Tribal Account* (LA: Feral House, 2001), p.43.

of Public Image, the Damned, Husker Dů, Zounds, Black Sabbath... even Dire Straits – eight whole bars of the ‘Sultans of Swing’ solo lifted wholesale!³⁰

Many punk musicians either came from the folk scene or, more often, turned to it as they grew older. Dave Dictor of hardcore legends MDC (short for Millions of Dead Cops), for example, had played bluegrass music with a group called Solar Pigs in the mid-1970s prior to becoming a punk.³¹ Steve Bluemer of anarcho-punks Symbol of Freedom hints strongly at a respect for and significant influence from folk music:

Communal mettle is not exclusive to a musical genre. Townes Van Zandt’s *Rear View Mirror* is just as arresting as, say, [anarcho-punk classic] The Mob’s *Let The Tribes Increase*... but the greatest single influence in my life was my grandfather, who worked most of his life down the [coal mining] pit and never once hit his wife.³²

Bluemer is not alone in supposing that the impetuses behind punk had precedents in folk music and folk culture. Kurt Cobain of Nirvana once described Leadbelly as ‘the first punk rocker, because he was such a hardened person’, for example.³³ Tim

³⁰ Ramsey Kanaan quoted in Gasper, Ian, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984* (London: Cherry Red, 2006), p.442. Relevantly enough, Kanaan explicitly states that he was ‘getting into some contemporary political folk music’ around the time that this, as it were, *classically folk-ish* re-working of existing material was taking place.

³¹ Blush, *American*, p.237. Millions of Dead Cops is only one of several slogans MDC have claimed their name as an acronym of, it should be said.

³² Quoted in Gasper, *The Day*, p.263.

³³ Quoted in True, Everett, *Nirvana: The True Story* (London: Omnibus, 2006), p.147.

Gosling, in one of the surprisingly few academic studies of anarcho-punk, has also noted a certain perceived debt from punk to folk: ‘the songs displayed a certain philosophical and sociological awareness, thus far rare in the world of rock but having antecedents in folk and protest songs’.³⁴ Penny Rimbaud, key player in the anarcho-punk collective Crass (see chapter three below), makes a comparable claim that Crass’s punk was ‘modern folk music’.³⁵ ‘Like the blues, punk was the people’s music, made for the people by the people’, he has further suggested.³⁶

The element of which Rimbaud speaks can be labelled as a desire for *inclusivity*, a desire that ‘anyone can do it’ as punks will often say. This impulse towards inclusivity has been critiqued by David Hesmondhalgh, who argues that the ‘aesthetic position which only values simplicity’, which he attributes to the punk-related indie scene, is problematical since ‘it encourages widespread participation through de-skilling’.³⁷ Linking this directly to ‘the ethos of collective participation in folk revivalism’, Hesmondhalgh’s complaint seems to be as to an alleged ‘nostalgic aesthetic, which implicitly argues for a return to a fantasised version of pre-modern social relations of production’.³⁸ This element of ‘de-skilling’ is, presumably, essentially synonymous with the term amateurism I have used above. It may be that

³⁴ Gosling in Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, p.170.

³⁵ Rimbaud, Penny aka J.J. Ratter. *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK, 1998), p.96.

³⁶ Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*, p.79.

³⁷ Hesmondhalgh, David, ‘Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre’, *Cultural Studies* 13/1 (1999), pp.34-61: 56. For more detail as to the intimate relationship between punk and indie music, see chapter one, footnote two, below.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p.20.

Hesmondhalgh is right that the ‘widespread participation’ which amateurism can seem to allow involves a nostalgic fantasy for a pre-modern society. If participation feels like an empowering activity for punks and folkies, however, it might be hasty to dismiss the desire for inclusivity as fantasy from a political point of view.

By some accounts, not only does punk resemble folk but the opposite also applies. For example, Neil Gaiman’s recent foreword to the re-issue of Martin Millar’s early 1990s novel *The Good Fairies of New York* suggests that it is ‘a book for every fiddler who has realised, half-way through playing an ancient Scottish air, that the Ramones “I Wanna Be Sedated” is what folk music is really all about, and gone straight into it’.³⁹ The enigmatic aspect of this statement, of course, is as to ‘what folk music is really all about’. For Gaiman (and Millar, perhaps, whose eighteen inch tall fairies Morag and Heather have raised the ire of their Scottish clan by performing punk classics on their violins despite being accomplished fiddlers lauded for their dexterity), it may be that folk is really all about simplicity and not playing too many notes, hence their love of the Ramones song. On the other hand, perhaps Gaiman thinks the Ramones (at least one of whom is known to have worked as a male prostitute) are folk on account of the fact that they derive from the common classes, not the elite ones. In any case, the suggestion that a Scottish air could be complementary to ‘I Wanna Be Sedated’ alleges an intriguing reciprocity between the two musical areas.

³⁹ Gaiman, Neil, foreword to Millar, Martin, *The Good Fairies of New York* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2006), back cover text.

A recent academic study of karaoke by Rob Drew, meanwhile, has more definitely found the encouragement of inclusivity and participation to be the essential source of comparability between punk and folk musics: ‘Karaoke’s ready-made accompaniment and “anyone can do it” philosophy create a context that distinguishes it from other music scenes. Like the traditional sing-alongs of the 1960s folk revival and early punk sensibilities two decades later, karaoke allows great latitude for different levels and kinds of participation’.⁴⁰

Clearly, then, punk is perceived by many to have something definite in common with folk music. Before exploring this further, it will be useful to outline the kind of folk music which the commentators just quoted probably have in mind, and the kind of collective participation which folk allows.⁴¹

What Is Folk? Getting the Folk ‘Us’ in Focus

Speaking to *Melody Maker* in 1981, Bert Jansch insisted that ‘I don’t think any of us can be left behind and classified as an old folkie... Does a young punk in the street

⁴⁰ Drew, Rob, “‘Scenes’: Dimensions of Karaoke in the United States’, in Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, pp.64-79: 76.

⁴¹ In addition to the literature cited on specific points, I have drawn on the following in formulating my understanding of post-war folk music: Vic Gammon, in a range of texts such as ‘A.L. Lloyd and History’ in Russell, Ian, *Singer, Song and Scholar* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1986); Boyes, *The Imagined Village*; Lloyd, A.L., *Folk Song in England* (New York: International Publishers, 1967); Stock, Jonathon, ‘Ordering Performance, Leading People: Structuring an English Folk Music Session,’ *World of Music* 46/1 (2004), pp.41-70; Pickering, Michael, Green, Tony, *Everyday Culture: Popular Song and the Vernacular Milieu* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987).

have any idea what a folkie is? I don't think anyone's a folk singer these days.'⁴² An archetypal 1960s singer-songwriter and 'folkie', Jansch may have been justified in presuming that punks of the day mostly viewed folkies as fogeys.⁴³ It is interesting to wonder, however, whether the man who had sung the strident 'Anti-Apartheid' in the mid-1960s had much awareness of, for example, the political and social concerns which lay beneath the surface appearance of the apparently-nihilistic subculture towards which his complaint was directed.⁴⁴

During the post-war period, the question of what folk music 'really is' has been hotly contested. Indeed even casual observers of the mid-twentieth century revival of (an idea of) folk music must be aware of the debates which have raged around, in particular, *authenticist* positions (exemplified by Ewan MacColl in particular, with his insistence upon 'correct' performance for maximisation of authenticity) and *progressive* approaches (with the subject of Bob Dylan's 1965 decision to 'go electric' being the most-discussed case). The former position has, for quite some time, held little sway in critical circles for the principal reason that an authentic, original, pure folksong with a specific, appropriate performance style can only seriously be

⁴² Harper, Colin, *Dazzling Stranger: Bert Jansch and the British Folk and Blues Revival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000), p.267.

⁴³ It's worth noting, that said, that Billy Bragg – known in 1981 as 'Billy Bonkers', front man of little-known punk-affiliated group Riff Raff – would begin gigging shortly thereafter with music which owed a strong debt, as acknowledged by Bragg himself, to Woody Guthrie as well as the Clash. Clearly, then, some 'young punks' had got some idea of what a 'folkie' represents or, perhaps we should say, had represented.

⁴⁴ Bert Jansch, 'Anti-Apartheid', *Bert Jansch/It Don't Bother Me*, Castle Communication, ESM CD 407, 1996 (originally issued 1965/1966 on Transatlantic Records).

said to exist in the mind of the person who seeks for it. The idea that folk music should be available for free manipulation by the progressive musician would seem to follow logically from there, and certainly the presumption that Dylan, in particular, was fully justified in embracing electric-blues/rock'n'roll instrumentation and stylisation has only intensified in recent times. His mid-1960s critics, meanwhile, have come to be often viewed as crazed 'Luddites', more or less.⁴⁵

It is inevitable that the figure of Bob Dylan should loom large in what follows. Dylan's progression from acoustic folk musician to electric rocker is widely regarded as the most pivotal moment in the continuation/development/cessation (depending on one's viewpoint) of a folk tradition in the second half of the twentieth century. The perception of gross significance, furthermore, was instantaneous – as well as provoking the hostile boos and jeers which will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, Dylan's use of a blues/rock backing band opened an immediate and intense debate over the very nature of modern folk music. An analysis, reproduced below, by Karl Dallas a few years after Dylan's conversion to electric amplification, shows an early response to this need for re-definition. Dallas, then a veteran commentator on the folk scenes of the UK in particular published these 'criteria [of] folk culture' as an apparent attempt to reconcile 'folk-rock' with the 'traditional' scene. At the time he published this (re-) definition in 1975, that earlier post-war tradition remained popular throughout Britain; Dallas, it seemed, wished to find a definition which would marry it with the McLuhan-descended concept of an 'electronic community':

⁴⁵ For more on this, see Martin Scorsese's 2006 documentary *Bob Dylan: No Direction Home* (Paramount Pictures, 208 minutes, 2005), and Greil Marcus's *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (London: Faber, 2005).

composition and transmission should be oral;
 as a consequence of this, there should be a continuous process of re-creation in
 which the forces of tradition, variation and selection interplay dynamically;
 consequently, authorship should be increasingly difficult to establish and each
 member of the ‘electronic community’ (if there is such a thing) should regard
 the culture as personally his [sic];
 the composer and/or performer will be regarded as comparatively insignificant,
 more as the servant of his community than its leader;
 the distinctions between audiences and artist will tend to blur and break down.⁴⁶

Note that, for one thing, the ‘forces of tradition’ in this passage are far from being dismissed but, rather, are offered as a tool through which an individual (whether part of the progressive ‘electronic community’ or not) can simultaneously ‘own’ the (folk) culture as well as serving it. Interestingly, Bob Dylan has made a similar point about the pluralized ownership of meaning in folksong in his recent autobiographical work: ‘A folk song has over a thousand faces and you must meet them all if you want to play this stuff. A folk song might vary in meaning and it might not appear the same from one moment to the next. It depends on who’s playing and who’s listening.’⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Karl Dallas in Laing, Dave, Dallas, Karl, Denselow, Robin, Shelton, Robert, *The Electric Muse: The Story of Folk into Rock* (London: Methuen, 1975), p.123. Dallas is deliberately referring here to the 1954 IFMC definition of folksong as product of tradition, variation and community selection.

⁴⁷ Dylan, Bob, *Chronicles, Volume 1* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2004), p.71.

The difference between the two explications, of course, balances on the question of audience and performer ('artist'): where Dallas hopes to compound the two, Dylan proposes that either can influence the 'meaning' with an implication that this semantic shift could be generated by either 'who's playing' or 'who's listening' *potentially* in isolation from each other. The idea, inferable though not entirely explicit in Dylan's comment, that communicative substance can be locatable in either transmission *or* reception individually (as well, presumably, as both simultaneously) is Barthesian in its promotion of what we might call the 'reader' of the music as well as the 'writer'.⁴⁸ Closer analysis of this tension between author and reader and between the collective and the individual will be provided in chapter two below. For now, it is simply worth noting that, in the folk scene, it is often assumed that re-presentation of traditional material can lead, potentially, to a distinct form of expressive individuality yet a form of totalised universality ('you must meet them *all*') remains a crucial part of this conditionalised folk individuality.⁴⁹

The last point brings forward a slightly different but equally central question about folk music: who should make it? '*Anyone*' is the answer which many folkies give. This belief remains strongly held in the folk scene today, as a recent editorial in *The Living Tradition* magazine indicates through negation: 'We are increasingly being treated as music consumers rather than music-makers', the editor rails, blaming 'the majors... [and the] big music business' for this treatment in a manner which one

⁴⁸ Barthes, *Image*.

⁴⁹ For an insightful discussion of 'the individual's role in traditional change' in folk music specifically, see Bohlman, *The Study*, p.74.

might also find in the zines of the punk movement.⁵⁰ Yet if folk magazines such as this aim to encourage people to make music rather than simply consume it, it is important to note the existence of contrasting tendencies in the contemporary scene where expert musicianship, virtuosic performance and professional approaches are often applied to the folk scene without any apparent sense of irony.

As with the punk scene, an underground-mainstream binary can perhaps be discerned here: folk interpreted as a music which anyone can perform, which is about production rather than consumption, which is not part of the ‘big music business’, on the one hand; folk as a music suitable for the concert venue, for the exceptional performer to perform whilst a suitably large audience listens, for the majors to promote and profit from, on the other. It is also worth noting that such a conception is not new in the post-war folk scene and undoubtedly pre-dates the punk interest in a DIY approach to music-making. Thus Oscar Brand, a composer and performer who had been active in the US scene since the 1930s, could describe folk in the early 1960s as a ‘home-made, “do-it-yourself” music, within the reach of all of limited means and no more than average ability’.⁵¹ This idea sits uneasily with recent inventions such as the BBC Folk Awards, a range of contemporary folk hit-parade charts and advanced lessons for the folk musician who wants to ‘go further’. Subsequent observations from Brand, however, suggest that there is nothing new in any contemporary tension between an encouragement of audience participation

⁵⁰ *The Living Tradition* issue 70, Blaydon, September/October 2006, p.4.

⁵¹ Brand, Oscar, *The Ballad Mongers: Rise of the Modern Folk Song* (Toronto: Fitzhenry & Whiteshade, 1962), p.57.

against a (pop-style, Brand argues) desire to consume the work of a talented performer:

I have heard comments from folk singing fans throughout the country that concerts are being ‘over-singalonged’... Pete Seeger... agreed that there had been some discussion of this problem, and that he had started to cut down the audience participation portions of his programs. Many folk song enthusiasts will not sing along and will not play along. And a majority of pop music fans would rather listen to a popular recording of a folk song than participate in its presentation.⁵²

This question of how far people actually *want* to participate, and what may or may not *motivate* them to take up music as an active rather than passive activity in the first place, will be returned to later in the chapter. In any case, whatever the quantity of participation amounts to in different moments of the post-war folk scenes, Brand’s comments indicate that at least some ‘folk song enthusiasts’ believed they could do ‘it’ and that this was (and, it can reasonably be presumed still is, in many contexts) a significant difference between most ‘pop fans’ and many practitioners of post-war folk music.

Folk as Anti-Pop: Amateurism, Commerciality and the Urge to Perform

This sense that, whatever folk is, *it certainly isn’t pop*, has been a consistent feature of the post-war tradition. As it is conceived by many enthusiasts and amateur

⁵² Ibid: p.57.

practitioners, folk isn't about stars, doesn't yearn for wealth, is against commerce, is not packaged, not prefabricated and certainly is not mass entertainment. Identity based on negation, however, must always be precarious and, therefore, this idea of folk as something outside of pop requires closer examination.

Folk's primary claim to difference from pop rests on the presumption that, where the latter is 'commercial', the former is based on other motivations. As with punk's aspirations to challenge commercial concerns, it is easy to point out that all agency in a capitalist system will be affected, at least partly, by that system on every level. Perhaps, however, the aspiration to by-pass commercial considerations is worth allowing at least some consideration: how, exactly, *is* folk supposed to be less commercial than pop? The easiest way to begin engaging with this moot question is to take a particular case as exemplar.

In his lengthy and exceptionally detailed biography of the aforementioned 1960s folk icon Bert Jansch, Colin Harper makes repeated claims for the guitarist's uneasy relationship with the pop scene and the world of commerce with which pop makes no secret of its complicity : Bert 'liked Donovan as an individual and enjoyed his early recordings [but] was less inclined towards... the nature of the pop game of which Don was a part, and particularly his management';⁵³ Bert believed that 'to sell your music is to sell your soul... to give your music is to buy your freedom';⁵⁴ he would tell his less-famous friend Anne Briggs, the latter has claimed, 'oh shit, I wish I was you, just travelling around singing what you really want to sing and doing what you want to

⁵³ Harper, *Dazzling*, p.186.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*: p.6.

do’;⁵⁵ he felt ‘at odds’ with fame;⁵⁶ he only wanted to ‘earn a living’, not to be a regarded as a ‘genius’;⁵⁷ etc. However, Harper also reveals that Jansch certainly did acquire a string of management deals, including managers for whom commerce rather than music was the prime motivation;⁵⁸ he did sell his music, and went on doing so in lean periods where other forms of employment would almost certainly have allowed him to ‘earn a living’ of a greater size;⁵⁹ and, overwhelmingly, the biography shows that no matter how uneasy the man allegedly felt about his fame, he was addicted to performing in front of audiences.

⁵⁵ Ibid: p.225

⁵⁶ Ibid: p.227.

⁵⁷ Ibid: p.259.

⁵⁸ Harper informs us that Nat Joseph, with whom Jansch had a long-held business relationship was a ‘businessman... always chasing the big return... the archetypal entrepreneur’ (ibid: p.117); Jo Lustig, who managed Jansch’s group the Pentangle, was ‘abrasive, and his fee [was] substantial... his energy fearsome’ (p.217); as the biography proceeds into Jansch’s long years of alcoholism, a number of other managers and businessmen associated with Jansch are painted as dubious figures with the classic financial motivation normally associated with ‘pop’. Bruce Dunnet, meanwhile, a figure with whom Jansch appears to have had a loose manager-artist relationship, states (p.203) that ‘I will never forgive him’ for deserting him for other (more pushy?) management.

⁵⁹ His solo album *From the Outside*, Konnexion, KOMA 788006, 1985, is reported to have been ‘cobbled together’ and then ‘slipped out’ on a ‘tiny’ label in a pressing of ‘only’ 500 copies, (ibid, p.273). No matter how few hours in the recording studio this may have required, it seems difficult to imagine that the profit generated could have exceeded that which Jansch could have earned through the same number of hours spent in conventional employment even at minimum wage. This is not to decry Jansch – his immense reputation as an innovative guitarist is well-justified and his on-going desire to express himself through music song is not being questioned here. The idea that his primary motivation was ‘making a living’, however, is surely disingenuous.

Despite the obvious contradictions in this case, the question of *motivation* may nevertheless offer a clue as to at least one comparative (and general, again) difference of commercialism between folk and pop scenes. In a nutshell, the writer, arranger or singer of seriously-commercial pop music makes no secret of what they hope the music will bring: wealth and hopefully lots of it. If folk-orientated musicians and their advocates are, admittedly, often over zealous in their claims to be entirely free of commercial influences, their tendency to keep making music whether it sells well or not does set them apart from pop figures such as, to pick just one example, Pete Waterman whose outspoken belief in sales as indicator of musical value is overwhelming. It is hard to imagine that Waterman would continue producing music if it was only for the small audiences which Bert Jansch has attracted in recent decades. It seems fair to say, then, that folk musicians are, in almost every case, motivated at least in some degree by enthusiasm for the actual musical sound and the performance experience: performers and producers in the pop scene, on the other hand, can often be found, especially in private, to be quite disparaging about the genre of music in which they work.

That being the case, amateur folk musicians – for example, the floor singers who meet once a month in a pub near my home to take turns to sing for, it seems, each other's pleasure as well as their own – presumably represent the least commercial element in the wide range of contemporary musical activities described as 'folk'.⁶⁰ Indeed Sam

⁶⁰ A case could be put forward for the karaoke machine as pop's correlate for the 'floor singer' tradition, admittedly. The psychology is somewhat different, however, in the sense that the karaoke singer 'apes' a star rather than respectfully reproducing the art of 'ordinary' folk. A theoretical structure for greater insight into this psychological difference will be developed in the next chapter.

Richards, in what appears almost as a complaint about ‘a folk revival cult of amateurism’, has noted that in folk’s ‘festival circuit where would-be professionals [have] learned to whore for future bookings... the real sessions [are said to take place] in pubs outside the scheduled festival programme’.⁶¹ Whatever Richards’ personal feelings about this pro-amateur cult may have been, the claim that these pub sessions were/are more ‘real’ will be familiar to experienced festival-goers. The location of the performer on a pub floor, unpaid but singing with gusto, generates that alleged ‘real’-ism; the avoidance of the specifically hierarchical platform of the stage keeps this ‘real’ folk-ness to one side of the cynicism of the ‘would-be professional’, as many amateur enthusiasts see it.

Such a position was perhaps at the heart of Ewan MacColl’s complaint in 1961 that ‘the only notes some people care about are the pound notes... The folk song revival can get so far away from its traditional basis that in the end it is impossible to distinguish it from pop music and cabaret’.⁶² By the mid-1970s, blockbuster songs such as Lindisfarne’s ‘Fog on the Tyne’, Steeleye Span’s ‘All Around My Hat’ and The Strawbs’ ‘Part of the Union’ had turned MacColl’s nightmare scenario into something of a reality. Highly-respected folk musician Martin Carthy has noted that, at this very moment of folk’s partial-mutation into something resembling pop (in terms of musical content as well as sales), resistance to that popularisation process manifested itself as a contrary, indiscriminate acceptance of average and below-average musical quality:

⁶¹ Richards, *Sonic*, p.82.

⁶² Quoted in Harper, *Dazzling*, p.70.

It had become apparent [by the mid-1970s] that the folk clubs could be very, very easily satisfied. You didn't have to be that good. There was too much of this 'oh, it's just ordinary people, that means it's ordinary music'. What that meant for them is it's actually not all that good but it doesn't matter.⁶³

The frustration is understandable from a highly able instrumentalist such as Carthy who, around this period, had left the commercially successful folk-rock group Steeleye Span to 'go back to his roots' in the amateur-inclusive folk-club scene for which he appears to have held a life-long passion. The irony of a *folk* performer complaining about 'ordinary people' making 'ordinary music' is hard to miss, however. Sam Richards, by contrast, has managed to balance similar concerns with an admiration for the folk-clubs' inclusionary principles:

[Folk clubs in the 1970s] adopted a deliberately conservative approach [but] within these confines it was assumed that everyone had an equal right to do a floor spot once in a while. While no bones were made about who were considered good singers (there was a hierarchy), those whose experience of singing was limited were rarely openly criticised for having a bad voice, a quiet voice, or anything else.⁶⁴

Richards describes, a few pages later, 'a chap in Exmouth who was practically tone deaf and utterly embarrassing to listen to' but, unlike Carthy, posits this as a component of the folk-club scene which one might actually be able to applaud: '[the

⁶³ *Folk Britannia: 3. Between the Wars*, dir. Mike Connolly, BBC television, 60 mins, 2006.

⁶⁴ Richards, *Sonic*, p.74

clubs] had an underlying ideology of participation, immediacy and intimacy... a direct democracy which extended to anyone who wanted to be involved'.⁶⁵ Before Martin Carthy is unfairly assigned a position of excessive elitism or self-aggrandisement, however, questions of motivation are (again) worth considering. If it is the exceptional performances of the likes of Martin Carthy which often actually generate the desire to perform in the less gifted/learned folksinger, as seems likely, the elevation of the above-average performer becomes less easily condemned. An important question, to which we will return, is: who can *honestly* say, be they working in the fields of folk, punk, free jazz or any other music with egalitarian aspirations regarding performing opportunities, that they do not discriminate on some level between what they consider to be good, bad or indifferent performances? Certainly Sam Richards, despite an avowed interest in the 'musical democracy' towards which his book attempts to guide us, clearly acknowledges the existence of folk-club 'hierarchy' in the quotation above.⁶⁶

It is doubtful whether the absolute removal of performance hierarchy is either possible or desirable, in any form of music. Absolute insistence upon purely amateur or

⁶⁵ Ibid: p.81.

⁶⁶ Overall, it is fair to say that Richards's book is ambivalent about the possibility of the *Musical Democracy* referenced in his title, hence the references to residual hierarchy and the 'cult of amateurism', on the one hand, and his apparent enthusiasm for the 'ideology of participation', on the other hand. This ambivalence is also notable in his account of the work of Cornelius Cardew, where the composer's movement towards Maoism and folk music is presented with a scepticism that raises the question as to whether 'anyone can do it' in classical music. Richards's work on Cardew also makes an interesting counterpoint to Small's theory of *Musicking*, the former's account implying that attempts to make the classical field more like the latter's desired future should at least be considered cautiously.

‘hobbyist’ approaches, as certain voices in the punk underground certainly have demanded, is also questionable in economic terms – capitalism hardly being something one can simply opt out of. Professional performers have, like anyone else, to make a living, and to quote lyrics from punk/folk crossover artist Billy Bragg, ‘I like toast as much as anyone but not for breakfast dinner and tea’.⁶⁷ It is interesting to wonder how many amateur folk performers choose never even to listen to music by professionals for whom high-quality performance has become economic necessity. Although the answer is likely none, Richards’ point about the admirable emphasis on participation in the folk clubs remains an important dimension in the overall folk scene – a dimension where ‘anyone can do it’ rhetoric certainly does often seem to have manifested itself as tangible reality.

The tension between pro-amateur idealism and an acceptance of professionalism as pragmatic necessity remains strong in folk today. Thus Seth Lakeman, whose 2005 Mercury Music Prize nomination saw him ‘pushing folk into the mainstream’ according to a *Guardian* newspaper headline, is challenged in the accompanying article to explain if he has ‘sold out’ by signing to a major record label.⁶⁸ His response – ‘I was almost pushed into [the deal] by circumstances’ – comes over as somewhat apologetic. Meanwhile, the article’s discourse regarding the risks of fame – ‘Folk seems popular like never before... Folk is definitely attaching itself to younger people... But does this popularity mean the term folk actually ceases to have the meaning it did or, indeed, any meaning at all?’ – should be familiar by now with its

⁶⁷ Billy Bragg, ‘I Don’t Need This Pressure Ron’, b-side of ‘Days Like These’ 12" EP, Chrysalis, GODX8, 1985.

⁶⁸ *The Guardian*, 17th October 2006, G2 supplement, p.22-3.

implication of folk as a disappearing music for old people and, of course, the antithesis of pop(ular) music.⁶⁹

Elsewhere in the contemporary music scene there are signs that the ideal of inclusion for amateurs perseveres both inside *and* outside the ‘traditional’ folk movement (traditional, from this perspective, meaning the post-war folk revival, confusingly enough): from the edge of the inside, Devandra Banhart is reported to have lent his guitar to spontaneously-chosen audience members on a recent UK tour;⁷⁰ in the ostensibly outside-of-folk genre of ‘indie’ music, on the other hand, New Jersey’s the Wrens have posted piano scores to their fans in advance of live performances, so that the band (who describe themselves as ‘no different from any of the people coming to see us’) can be joined on stage by their audience.⁷¹

Such inclusivity is less straightforwardly participatory than the floor singer system of the folk-club. It shows, nevertheless, that a particular element within (and, it seems, without) the folk tradition – that is, the encouragement of non-professionals to participate – remains extant. Perhaps that impetus could in fact be one definition of what folk music ‘is’ (or should be). Certainly the un-trained nature of the performers has attracted many enthusiasts, from the early song collectors such as Cecil Sharp to the curiosity-seeking CD-buyer (or digital downloader) of today. Thus Vic Gammon

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *The Guardian*, 24th November 2006, p.6. Banhart has been described as an example of ‘nu folk’ amongst other dubious sub-genres, although the description ‘singer-songwriter’ is probably as good as any.

⁷¹ Ibid. An audience member is quoted in the article claiming that ‘being on stage with the Wrens pretty much made my year’.

was driven to warn, in a recent BBC Radio 3 broadcast, that ‘the biggest danger [to the effective transmission of folksong, presumably] is... over use of a melodic quality in the voice’. As an example, Gammon suggests that Joan Baez’s ‘beautiful voice at times [makes] the songs subservient’, going on to clarify that ‘the most beautiful voice is not necessarily the best vehicle for conveying the song’.⁷² Though this is undoubtedly an opinion with which many admirers of, for example, Harry Smith’s celebrated *Anthology of American Folk Music* could agree, an interesting question is thus thrown forth.⁷³ If it is the unbeautiful elements of a voice (or, correlatively, instrumental performance), the inaccuracies of pitching, phrasing, rhythm, etcetera, which help to convey the *meaning* of the song – a meaning which can actually be partially *hidden* or at least obscured by a ‘beautiful voice’ – then to what extent can the song be said to generate that meaning at all?

The question is crucial because at stake is the very communal, collective nature of passed-on ‘folksong’ as it has been conceived. Ruth Crawford Seeger has touched on this problem:

⁷² *The Singer, Not The Song*, producer unknown, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 16th January 2007.

⁷³ Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*, currently available as 6 CD box-set, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW 40090, 1997, first issued in 1952 on Folkways records in three volumes of vinyl double-LP sets. It is widely credited with a generous influence on the subsequent US folk revival and retains a particular cachet with many contemporary listeners who might have held little previous interest in pre-rock’n’roll music for its perceived insight into the ‘old, weird America’ which Greil Marcus wrote of it in his widely-admired text *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes* (London: Picador, 1997).

Passed on year after year from one person to another, a majority of the songs can be said to have been modified in many ways [thus] styles of performance in the singing of any one song can differ radically... Occasional performances can, in fact, become so highly individual that the question will arise whether the singer can be said to have ‘composed’ a new song.⁷⁴

If however, that question can truly arise in ‘occasional performances’, does it not potentially follow that at least some degree of ‘individuality’ must also then occur in *all* performances? Seeger seeks to downplay such individual significance stating that any ‘invention’ or ‘composition indeed’ involved is best understood ‘mainly as added increment to a current stock or repertoire’.⁷⁵ Because the folk are proposed, by Seeger, to hold ‘common possession’ of this folk-song, she claims the stock/repertoire of songs to be ‘unaffected, except in rare instances, by considerations of authorship, copyright, publication or critical review’.⁷⁶ That’s easy for her to say, a grandchild of one of the obscure singers on Harry Smith’s still-selling *Anthology* might want to point out; if voices are as significant in the transmission of folk song as Vic Gammon seems to imply, that grandchild might feel entitled to rather more of a stake in the profits from what Seeger wants to delimit as ‘common possession’, however.

Ruth Crawford Seeger was part of a Left-wing family whose role in the politicisation of American folk music was absolutely critical. The British scene also included

⁷⁴ Seeger, Ruth Crawford, *The Music of American Folk Song* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2001), p.7.

This book is in fact the unexpurgated text which was first published in an abbreviated form as the introduction to her 1940 book *Our Singing Country*.

⁷⁵ Ibid: p.8.

⁷⁶ Ibid: p.8.

several Marxists and socialists amongst its ranks during the 1950s and 60s, such as Ewan MacColl and Bert Lloyd (who, it is worth noting, were introduced to one another by Seeger family associate Alan Lomax, also a Left-winger). It makes sense, therefore, to consider in more detail the more overtly political dimension of the post-war folk tradition.

Protest and Survive: Shall We Not Be Moved?

‘Folk music’, as we have seen so far, is a multi-faceted and self-contradictory beast. In political terms, a wide range of positions upon the Left-Right spectrum can be identified. Cecil Sharp’s insistence upon ‘folksong’ as a rural phenomenon, for example, reflects the conservatism at the heart of the early English folk revival. Tony Benn, on the other hand, has explained a very different conception of what folk music should be, thoroughly at odds with the preservationist position:

I always thought Cecil Sharp House was a rather precious view – ‘we’ve got to preserve the traditions’, in the way in which an archaeologist might pull something up and say ‘here’s an old pot from Roman times’. That’s totally different from the idea of it being a vehicle of popular expression, with the idea of inspiring people to carry on, to bring peace, justice and human rights.⁷⁷

It is the latter, ‘protest’-orientated aspect of post-war folk music which is of particular interest for comparison with the punk movement. According to folklore specialist

⁷⁷ Benn makes these comments in *Folk Britannia 1: Ballads and Blues*, dir. Mike Connolly, BBC television, in English, 60 minutes, 2006.

Ailie Munro, 'protest was an important element in the fifties and sixties. It became less fashionable in the seventies, but by the eighties the increasing polarisation of rich and poor, unemployment, apartheid, the women's movement, the nuclear threat, pollution and other national and world topics produced many new songs in this genre'.⁷⁸ The timing is interesting: protest music, allegedly, experienced a lull in the 1970s: precisely the time when the Sex Pistols et al began complaining of the music scene's 'old farts' who, allegedly, had nothing to say.

Vernacular description can be enlightening. Could there be some significance in the fact that, whilst folk had a *boom* in the 1950s and 60s, punk had an *explosion* in the 70s? Both suggest the effect of a bomb, but interestingly the latter implies greater intensity. It would be spurious to claim great significance from this, but the idea that 1970s punk could perhaps have presented a more intense voicing of protest than earlier post-war moments is surely worth considering. To argue as much is certainly rather contrary to most critical wisdom, which often holds that the 1960s was a pinnacle of post-war popular protest whilst punk was a somewhat confused echo of that anterior and more acutely significant decade. Which was *really* more important? Neither, perhaps: both were certainly a failure in terms of the attempt to 'ban the bomb', for example, though punk bands such as Crass certainly did much to revive CND (see chapter three for more details). Avoiding generational chauvinism as much as possible generational chauvinism, perhaps the important point here is that punk figures, at least in some part, as a continuation from anterior protest musics. The work of George McKay has provided important support for such a claim in his work on

⁷⁸ Munro, Ailie, *The Democratic Muse: Folk Music Revival in Scotland* (Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996), p.165.

cultures of resistance, *Senseless Acts of Beauty*.⁷⁹ McKay offers persuasive evidence of a clear lineage from the 1970s ‘free festival’ scene, through the ‘anarcho-punk’ movement and into the ‘rave’ scene where ‘New Age Travellers’ have mixed up folk, punk, ‘techno’ and general frivolity to create a distinct style of (subtle, and debatably effective but certainly not inconsiderable) protest. McKay has linked this to the Reclaim the Streets movement – a ‘protest method’, we might better describe it as – in subsequent texts.⁸⁰

A little information on Reclaim the Streets might be useful here. Such a protest is usually constituted by the sudden occupation of a road, nearly always in a city centre, which is then turned into a carnivalesque party usually with a sound system or, failing that, a percussion group. Dancing will normally offer a dual function: performative release from the shackles of cultural conformity, on the one hand, and more often than not protection of a vulnerable individual dangling dangerously high in the air from a hastily assembled wooden tripod, on the other hand. The dangled person makes it difficult for the police to intervene since disturbance of the tripod could lead to a head injury; often a crucial role, therefore, if the demonstration is to be a success, though less than desirable for the individual since eventual arrest is extremely likely.⁸¹ In the

⁷⁹ McKay, George, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996).

⁸⁰ McKay, George, *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).

⁸¹ I have seen a WPC shaking such a tripod, in a late 1990s demonstration outside Newcastle Civic Centre, that said. When I objected to the consequent risk to the safety of the young woman dangling around ten feet above the equally young Constable’s head, she replied that ‘she shouldn’t be up there in the first place’. Reclaim the Streets protestors may have been naïve in believing that police would be

late 1990s, like most UK cities, Newcastle saw a good number of Reclaim the Streets-style protests. The most successful of these closed a crucial road outside the city's cathedral for several hours. It is worth noting, in the present context, that the individual up the tripod during those hours was a local fanzine writer and long term fan of punk music. Many others involved in the demonstration were from the local punk milieu, with a long history of activism.⁸²

Reclaim the Streets was a distinctive form of protest in the 1990s. What does it mean when protest changes style, however? What is lost and what is gained in the change? Perhaps the change results from the ostensible detachment normally delimited as 'the generation gap'. Jeff Nuttall, an insider of the early CND movement and an individual with an acute interest in post-war cultural developments, has certainly implied as much with regard to the impetus for what is often thought of as the first post-war protest generation:

The people who had passed puberty at the time of the [invention of the nuclear] bomb found that they were incapable of conceiving of life *without* a future...

deterred from endangering the lives of protestors, therefore. This auto-biographical observation is perhaps unnecessary after the death of Ian Tomlinson in 2009, I might add; it is hardly any secret that civilians are endangered by the police when demonstrations are taking place, that is.

⁸² Informal interview with 'Mike', November 2007, whom I myself had witnessed dangling from the tripod at the demonstration outside the cathedral mentioned above. From directly observing the clothing (for example, t-shirts with band names on them) and hairstyles of many individuals on this and other demonstrations around the UK and Europe in the 1990s and 2000s, I would argue that it readily evident that a good proportion of the 'direct action' community continues to derive from the punk milieu.

Their patterns of life had formed, the steady job, the pension, the mortgage, the insurance policy, personal savings, support and respect for the protection of the law, all the paraphernalia of constructive, secure family life... The people who had not yet reached puberty at the time of the bomb were incapable of conceiving of life *with* a future... Dad was a liar. He lied about the war and he lied about sex. He lied about the bomb and he lied about the future....⁸³

Problems with this argument are obvious, however. Bertrand Russell, one of the key figures in the early CND movement, had been born in 1872, thus reaching puberty prior to Nuttall, yet nevertheless managed to object to Britain's nuclear 'deterrent'. Much of the age-group Nuttall delimits, particularly from the working classes, were absolutely eager to find security despite the fact of a potential nuclear holocaust. Perhaps most importantly, the criticisms against 'Dad' sketched by Nuttall would be echoed very strongly by the 1970s punk generation against a set of Dads from the perceived beatnik/hippie generation. Similarly, many from what we could call (in keeping with vernacular discourse) the 'eco-warrior' generation of the 1990s reacted against the failure of the 1970s punks to decisively 'cut the crap', and so on. To claim that the post-war Beatniks were the first young people to have railed against the values of older people is to forget, to give just one example, the Futurists of around fifty years earlier.

Nevertheless, there is clearly some generational aspect to the early post-war period. Interestingly, in this regard, McKay's researches into 'Cultures of Resistance since the Sixties' has been followed by some extensive writings on the connections between

⁸³ Nuttall, Jeff, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 20, emphasis retained from original.

the late 1950s Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the jazz, folk and skiffle musicians who were so prominent on the Aldermaston March and elsewhere during that same period about which Nuttall writes.⁸⁴ Regrettably, given the general erudition of his politico-cultural analyses of the 1950s and the 1970s and after, he has not as yet examined the connecting period: the 1960s. Perhaps this is natural enough, given the breadth of analysis already available on the subject of the politico-cultural developments of the 1960s. It is fascinating to wonder, however, whether the period represents a crucial *bridging* moment precisely because it provided a linkage between the more socialist-orientated period of the beatniks and the more anarchistic period of the hippies, punks and so on.

This is not to say that all agents within the late 1950s/early 1960s era were necessarily orthodox Marxists (though it is well known that many were, including some of the most significant figures in the British and American folk scenes) nor that anarchistic tendencies necessarily became dominant amongst Left-leaning youth from the late 1960s onwards (though, again, there is plenty of evidence of an increase in anarchistic rhetoric, not least of which would be the eruption of UK punk from around 1976 onwards). The point is more that during the mid 1960s, a huge shift took place in international youth culture, not least in the sense that mind-altering drugs were in far more common usage. In 1958, for example, there may have been individuals attempting to live without working, or who grew their hair, or smoked marijuana and stopped shaving and indulged in promiscuous sex whilst decrying the mainstream political scene as a sham; until the mid-to-late 1960s, however, the term ‘drop-out’

⁸⁴ McKay, George, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham and London: Duke, 2005), see chapter one in particular.

was not a familiar one nor was dropping out such a popular option for youth. One only has to compare a handful of mainstream Hollywood movies from, say, 1969 with some cinematic output from a decade earlier to see the appearance of a significant change.

What, one wonders, did traditional protest singers from the Left wing of the revival scene make of the late 1960s and 1970s hippies and drop-outs? Not much, perhaps, for the socialist analysis (still predominant in the mid 1970s folk scene) is certainly at odds with the drop-out mentality which it regards as more of a ‘cop-out’, as Gil Green has argued.⁸⁵ Green makes a highly critical analysis of the hippie counter-culture and suggests that without employment of a Marxist strategy the hippies are bound to fail. It is interesting to note, however, that the mid-1990s Conservative government’s Criminal Justice Act of 1994 prevented ‘illegal gatherings’ which ‘could consist of over ten people playing music at night, even with the landowner’s permission’. The fact that the ‘rave’ scene should be so obviously targeted suggests that this arm of the protest movement must have been having at least some continuing success in unsettling the government, then. No legislation against folk-clubs is known to have been proposed during the same period, nor indeed in any previous period.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ For example, see Green, Gil, *The New Radicalism: Anarchist or Marxist?* (New York: International, 1971).

⁸⁶ Harker, Ben, *Class Act: The Cultural and Political Life of Ewan MacColl* (London: Pluto, 2007) does indicate that Britain’s secret services kept detailed files on Ewan MacColl and others within the UK’s folk/protest scene, however. It may be, therefore, that the government would have been prepared to legislate against the folk movement if it was deemed necessary for the maintenance of the prevailing status quo.

Politically, then, there may be some important differences between the form of protest common to the post-war folk movement and the later punk movement, in addition to the various similarities I have suggested above. These differences, furthermore, may go far beyond simply a 'generation gap' of surface appearances; rather, perhaps, they are predicated upon what we could call ideological distinctions. I move now, therefore, to a closer comparison of punk and folk, in order to think out in more detail the distinction under consideration.

Section Summary

Many commentators have suggested that punk is akin to folk music. Where this comparison has been qualified by distinctions between the two, these commentators have often contradicted each other. Clearly folk is an identifiable tradition, however, which has diverged between professionalism and amateurism in a manner comparable to that seen in punk in the first section of the present chapter. Folk has also often been identified with socialism and Marxism in the post-war period, having veered away from the more Right wing traditionalism which often predominated in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

iii. Punk as Folk: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

The correlations, interstices and apparently-strong distinctions between punk and folk should by now be becoming clear. Of these, the most distinct *general* difference is perhaps that between conservation, preservation and recuperation in traditionalist/authenticist approaches, on the one hand, and aspirations towards innovation, originality and transgression in what is probably best described as a modernist attitude, on the other. This apparent difference will be considered more deeply in the next chapter. The idea of ‘breaking down the barrier between the audience and the band’ is, for now, a more suitable place to begin our comparison since, based on the information offered so far in this research, there would appear to be a definite similarity in this area.

In punk, the audience-performer barrier is commonly presumed to have been broken, in an absolute sense, despite blatant evidence to the contrary. Thus a recent performance by contemporary punk-related group the Evens was reported in a local magazine to have ‘dispense[d] with the barrier between band and audience entirely (hence the village fete setting)’. The latter reference to a ‘fete’ derives from the fact that the group were performing in the afternoon, in a Newcastle church, with vegan cakes on sale, thus admittedly creating an environment somewhat at odds with the average punk gig.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, since the group performed on a stage whilst more than a hundred paying audience members watched and listened in reverent silence,

⁸⁷ It is worth noting, however, that Evens vocalist Ian MacKaye – arguably the most important individual within the international punk underground – mentioned from the stage that ‘this is definitely a punk show’.

save for the odd moment of vocal accompaniment as directed by the group, it is hardly true to say that the ‘barrier’ had been dispensed with ‘entirely’: some hierarchy certainly remained, and the reviewer should therefore have better stated that the Evens *challenged* the audience/band barrier. If they had *entirely* dispensed with that barrier, it is difficult to see how there could have been a performance at all.

In the contemporary folk scene, on the other hand, where one might expect more encouragement of audience participation and a greater challenge to performative hierarchy than in punk, such efforts are not always strongly made. For example, the Evens’ performance required an entrance fee of £5, with a £4 ‘concession’ price for the un-waged, etc. A few months after their performance, doyenne of contemporary folk Kate Rusby appeared at the Sage Gateshead, a short distance away from the church where the Evens had performed, with ticket prices up to £32.⁸⁸ At the latter concert, no attempt was made to draw comments, opinions or any responses other than applause from the smartly-dressed audience who, without any ambiguity, were there to be entertained. At the Sage’s ‘folk’ gig, no singing along was encouraged.

These observations are not being made through any spirit of chauvinism for punk’s degree of inclusivity as compared with folk. It is simply interesting to note that elements of participation, egalitarianism and inclusivity *can* be more apparent in a punk-orientated setting than in certain environments which most would consider to be part of the folk scene (for example, certain key differences between Kate Rusby’s

⁸⁸ A few tickets were available for £6, but these supposedly cheap seats were in a highly undesirable position within the auditorium. Hierarchy persisted not only between audience and performer but also between audience members according to their willingness/ability to spend, in other words.

concert and the Evens' gig, as described above).⁸⁹ Punk and folk are differing fields, with differing modes of production in certain respects and differing musical tendencies.⁹⁰ Certainly much of the contemporary folk scene has a very legitimate claim to having retained a largely inclusive operational tendency: we have seen in the last section that the floor singers of the folk-club scene probably represent the strongest possible challenge in contemporary practice to audience-performer separation; singing along on choruses, for example, has always remained a feature of most folk-orientated contexts.

This last-mentioned tendency - singing along on the chorus - can of course also be found in punk, and in rock generally, that said. Interestingly, however, it occurs in

⁸⁹ I have emphasised the word 'can' here simply because this sometimes is the case, comparatively speaking, but certainly is not always the case. Any difference is not one of 'substance' but rather of variable practice in production, dissemination and discursive norms. Whilst the sociological conditions that may be related to this variability at a sub-genre level are an important topic of inquiry, I am less interested in that than in the overall discursive drift of the comparison. In short, I am saying that the authentic/commercial distinction in the folk field operates in a somewhat analogous way to punk's distinction between mainstream and underground. Sociological investigation of such patterns goes back at least to Howard Becker's classic study of jazz outsiders in the swing era, 'The Professional Jazz Musician and His Audience', *The American Journal of Sociology* 57/2 (1951), pp.136-44.

⁹⁰ As noted in the introduction, in general I am not using the term 'field' in the sense Bourdieu offers in, for example, *The Rules of Art*. Admittedly, however, to consider the differing modes of production between punk and folk is certainly to push the analysis in the general direction of Bourdieu's work. Without wanting to take the argument on a tangent here, it should at least be noted that Bourdieu's approach and comparable sociological approaches could be fruitful to the comparison at hand. We should also note, that said, that though the modes of production generally differ between punk and folk, there are also many great similarities, hence the copious number of claims of such listed earlier in the present chapter.

contextually opposite ways in folk and punk gigs. While no audience member is likely to sing along at a folk *concert*, such as the Kate Rusby performance mentioned above, vocal participation is nearly always found at the grassroots of the folk scene.⁹¹ On the other hand, mainstream punk groups performing at a relatively large venue such as Newcastle's Carling Academy are very likely to have the audience singing along with great enthusiasm.⁹² Ironically, however, the DIY *gigs* which occur in local pubs (and which, I suggest, are in many respects correlative to grassroots folk) would almost never involve such audience involvement, though the attendees are often enthusiasts of the bands who appear (as opposed to being casual 'punters' unfamiliar with the songs in advance of the gig).⁹³

A related area of similarity is the acceptance of a degree of 'amateurism' or, to describe it more accurately, limitations of playing and singing ability. As noted, the usefulness of this has been questioned in the folk scene for its tendency to, in effect, make a virtue of blandness. The same complaint is sometimes heard in punk, manifested as a gripe about 'too many bands that sound the same'. Generally

⁹¹ I base this assertion on my own experience of folk concerts and also conversations with folk musicians Phil and Cath Tyler (Sunday 18th May, 2007, Newcastle upon Tyne).

⁹² I base this assertion on my own experience of seeing punk bands in large venues and also conversations with punk musicians Marc Walker and Chris Lanigan (Sunday 25th May, 2007, Newcastle upon Tyne).

⁹³ To give an auto-biographical example, a sold-out performance by US underground-punk group Q And Not U in Newcastle's 100-capacity pub the Head of Steam was, I know for certain, full of many people who owned and loved their album; no vocal participation occurred, however, and some effort by the band to get the crowd to clap along on one song was met with a degree of embarrassment, it seemed. The Evens, as a punk-orientated group, are certainly exceptional in their enthusiasm for audiences to sing with them, it should therefore be acknowledged.

speaking, however, collectors of punk records are rarely much bothered by basic musical ability: this is particularly so in the garage punk sub-genre, where rudimentary playing from the likes of the Cramps' guitarists Poison Ivy and Brian Gregory is widely admired regardless of its technical simplicity; it is less the case in the hardcore scene (overwhelmingly populated by men, it is perhaps relevant to point out) where speed and accuracy of playing tend to be as strongly valued as they are in the heavy metal music which many enthusiasts of hardcore also enjoy; but overall, it is certainly fair to say that punk has generally welcomed the basic musician.⁹⁴ The fact that fans of a punk band such as the Slits are able to enjoy the music, despite instrumental performances which appear to be rudimentary in the extreme and ensemble cohesion (or lack thereof) which consistently implies imminent collapse, is an interesting example of what I call the beginner-ist aspect of punk.⁹⁵ One explanation of the appeal of the Slits in particular could be that the listener feels empowered to participate by such 'bad' playing: 'I found The Slits more inspiring

⁹⁴ Maureen Tucker of the Velvet Underground, one of the first wave of punk's most frequently cited influences, can be taken as a blueprint for many drummers in punk: minimal, straightforward but complementary to a group's rhythmic thrust; Siouxsie Sioux, John Lydon and Morrissey are good examples of, shall we say, tonally-challenged vocalists from the punk oeuvre who have used their limitation of musical technique for an aesthetic effect which has been actively admired and enjoyed.

⁹⁵ To say this is of course to touch on a much broader topic, namely the whole fraught subject of *simplicity* (dumbing down, repetitiveness, deliberately crass appeal, and so on) of popular music as such. Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* provides a good starting point for thinking about this territory. My focus here, however, is much more specific. It is on the extent to which, in both punk and folk, a common tendency to deliberately cultivate musical techniques that would normally be considered aesthetically impoverished is identified as aesthetically and/or politically positive (that is, as more honest, authentic, empowering and so on).

because The Clash were actually a very talented rock'n'roll band. But The Slits were bloody awful! I though [sic], well if they can do it... so we did'.⁹⁶

Yet this explanation seems incomplete, for if the Slits' performance had been 'bloody awful' in an absolute sense it seems likely that the audience member would have been repulsed from following their example rather than being motivated to move from audience to stage.⁹⁷ Furthermore, it is safe to presume that of the tens of thousands who bought and professed to enjoy the Slits' 'bloody awful' records, not all of those individuals chose to form bands themselves. Clearly something more is going on here, then; something which can perhaps best be understood by bearing in mind Vic Gammon's proposition that 'the most beautiful voice' is not necessarily the one certain audiences will prefer, essentially for reasons of communication. This theme is strongly voiced in many appraisals of folk performers, particularly by enthusiasts of the archived field recording: 'As far as I am concerned, a folk song is distinguishable by a special sound, a kind of 'simple noise'. This sound is the result of an artless, unself-conscious quality in the music and lyrics which commends itself to my critical ear'.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Penny Rimbaud of Crass describing the inspiration he took from his first experience of a punk gig, quoted in Berger, George, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus, 2006), p.76.

⁹⁷ Indeed, it is often said that the best Slits recording is the 1977 John Peel Show session (*The Peel Sessions*, 12" EP, Strange Fruit, SFRSCD052, 1998), recorded with their technically-limited early drummer Palmolive. This preference prevails despite the obvious playing 'superiority' of her male replacement Budgie, who appeared on the Slits debut LP and the advancement in technical skill from the remaining female musicians of the Slits on this later but sometimes less-loved recording (*Cut*, LP, Island records, ILPS 9573, 1979).

⁹⁸ Brand, *The Ballad*, p.10.

The case of the Slits bears similar hallmarks. For although the group's original drummer Palmolive would frequently crack her snare drum on and only on the first beat of the bar, contrary to the rock tradition of emphasising the 'backbeat' (the second and fourth beats in each bar); and though her use of the tom-drums often spills across bar-lines in a manner which a tutored percussionist might consider ungainly; and despite her phrasing patterns on the Slits' early recordings corresponding loosely (if at all) to the normal rule of drum patterns supporting verse/chorus structures (structures, incidentally, which were in fact always present in the Slits' sound); despite all these signs of 'bloody awful' musicianship, the Slits' music does hold a special appeal which other punk bands of the time lack, though few sound as limited in playing experience.

Gammon's implication that a less 'beautiful' voice can communicate something which technically-precise musicality cannot begs the question, what is folksong trying to convey? Without recourse to specific songs, it is perhaps possible nevertheless to paint an overall message which, as most receivers of the music understand it, is conveyed indirectly by folk's untrained voices, use of antiquated instrumentation and typical lyrical content: that there is something wrong with modern industrial life or, to put it less strongly, that the conveyer of the folksong is out of step with that life. Folksong tells us about the 'lost' purity of the pre-industrial, rural life (but lost by whom? did Cecil Sharp, for example, ever really know/own it? or, for that matter, Martin Carthy?); or it tells us, from at least the time of Woody Guthrie onwards, about the poor treatment of workers in the contemporary world. Even when folk music is taken to be Seth Lakeman playing a self-composed violin instrumental in

which he has introduced musical content (certain forms of ornamentation and harmonic progression, for example) that traditionalists might consider not to be ‘correct’ as folk, it is probably fair to say that typical fans of such a piece of music feel themselves to be connecting with something outside of the machinery of the modern pop industry. Arguably, therefore, folk always involves some symbolic displacement of modernity.

But who was it who sang ‘No Future’?⁹⁹ And why did this message strike a chord with so many people? Punk, too, questions the value of the modern industrial world. In the 1970s this meant getting ‘back to basics’ by playing music which eschewed the synthesisers, lengthy guitar solos and high ticket prices of the mainstream rock scene of the day; criticising the music industry for ‘manufacturing’ groups and selling music ‘like tins of baked beans’; singing songs about being on the dole; etc. In the 1980s and onwards, it has often also involved a greater degree of rejection of technology in music (hence ‘lo-fi’ recordings, rejection of sampling in favour of ‘real’ instruments, etc.); intensified and more specific criticisms of capitalism in some quarters; and an ambition towards constituting a separate ‘alternative’ (rather than an imminent, and thus also somewhat immanent, challenge) to the music industry.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Sex Pistols, ‘God Save The Queen’, *Bollocks*. It is hard to be sure whether the full line is ‘There’s no future *and* England’s dreaming...’ or ‘... *in* England’s dreaming’. Either way, a certain resonance with certain folk sensibilities of loss should be clear, not least of which is a concern with the state of the motherland.

¹⁰⁰ The immanent/imminent challenge might be exemplified by the Ramones’ insistence that ‘We Want the Airwaves’, implying the desire to (as soon as possible) enter the mainstream and change it from the *inside*. Groups such as Fugazi (as well as countless other lesser-known underground-punk bands), on the other hand, eschew ‘promo’ distribution to radio stations and actively refuse to take part in (or

Musicianship in punk and folk scenes, when held at a deliberately basic level, can be understood as a partial element in this, for the idea that it doesn't take an exceptional or highly-trained person to make music certainly goes against the grain of what the music industry would like the population to do – which is, of course, consume commercially-available recordings by professionals. Making music for pleasure is not in itself economically productive, except perhaps in its stimulation of instrument production and the generation of a 'talent pool' for commercial exploitation.¹⁰¹

If punk and folk share an element of antipathy towards industrial capitalism, then, there is obviously a significant difference of degree between an extremely subtle implied critique, perhaps pursued (in both punk and folk) through hobbyist musicianship, on the one hand, and the all-out pacifism and anti-capitalism of the likes of Crass (in punk) or Pete Seeger (in folk), on the other. The latter pair of examples offer a more intense oppositionality than the hobbyist does, but at both levels it is clear that there are some grounds for the claim of political similarities in folk and punk. Nevertheless, different political tendencies would seem to arise in terms of procedure, principle and ideology; I turn to these differences now.

garner the attention of, in the lesser-known cases) existing media systems, preferring to exist *outside* of 'the industry' as far as possible (*Ramones Mania*, double LP, Sire, 925 709-1, 1988).

¹⁰¹ The fact that any 'DiY' music-making is always a potential talent pool for the commercial music industry sets one limit to its capacity to function as an alternative; for more on this, see Hesmondhalgh, David, 'Flexibility, Post-Fordism and the Music Industry' in Frith, Simon, *Popular Music: Volume 2, The Rock Era* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.42-61: 55. Hesmondhalgh attributes the term 'talent pool' to Frith. A similar concept to Frith's is Toynbee's notion of a 'proto-market' in *Making Popular Music*.

Left/Right/Black/White: Which Side Are You On?

The song ‘Which side are you on?’ was written in 1932 by Florence Reece after she and her daughters had been ‘terrorised’ by ‘deputies employed by the mine owners’ searching for her husband Sam Reece, a US National Miners Union rank-and-file leader.¹⁰² Picked up in 1941 by the Almanac Singers, the song was also later recorded by Pete Seeger whose rendition retains the following lines from the Almanacs:

My daddy was a miner
 and I’m a miner’s son
 and I’ll stick with the union
 until the battle’s won.

The difference from Florence Reece’s original words – ‘My daddy was a miner, he’s now in the air and sun...’, a reference to the fact that Sam had been blacklisted and could no longer work in the mines, apparently – is illuminating because, instead of despair and anger, the song had been adapted to encourage faith, determination and, most crucially for our attention, *continuity*: the inevitable winning of the battle will consequently enable the song’s subject to replicate his father’s form of employment and, presumably, to secure the same source of work for future generations.

¹⁰² Sleeve notes of the CD booklet accompanying the Pete Seeger anthology (*If I Had a Hammer: Songs of Hope and Struggle*, CD, Smithsonian Folkways, SF CD 40096, 1998, p.5).

By the time of the 1984-5 NUM strike against the Thatcher-led Tory government's proposed pit closures, such optimism must surely have been hard to muster in the UK. Nevertheless, the song was resurrected by folk singers such as Dick Gaughan who adapted the end of one verse to enable himself to 'ask you here tonight, which side are you on?' Given Gaughan's well-known staunch Left-wing views, there can be little doubt that he didn't actually need to ask his audience this question, but to complain of this would be to miss the primary function of the song: the encouragement of class solidarity, a warning against joining the 'lousy scabs' and an instruction to 'be a man' by sticking with the union. Several different punk groups also performed benefit gigs in support of the miners. However, some voices from the latter quarter gave their support with a rather more urgently insurgent motivation:

If a miner said he was striking to protect his job and at the same time to damage, if not destroy, Thatcher's regime, I was prepared to support his struggle even if I did feel that no-one should have to suffer his terrible work conditions. I was prepared to support his struggle because it was part of a whole pattern of dissent that could eventually lead to mass insurrection.¹⁰³

Whilst Crass drummer Penny Rimbaud's openly seditious comments here are perhaps shocking – and, doubtless, intentionally so given Rimbaud's track record of testing the boundaries of acceptability, as we shall see in chapter three – they also reflect something of the difference between punk protest and folk protest in principle if not necessarily in practice. Paid work, in particular, is something which punk was not keen on from the outset. For example, the Clash's 'Career Opportunities' is more or

¹⁰³ Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*, p.264.

less a list of the jobs the singer *won't* do: 'I hate the army and I hate the RAF.... I hate the Civil Service too...'.¹⁰⁴ The lack of a sense of work as being intrinsically valuable does not necessarily eradicate a residue of class-consciousness, nevertheless, for when the vocalist asks, with deliberate sarcasm, 'do you wanna make tea at the BBC?' his rejoinder – 'do you really wanna be on top?' – also implies irony. Nevertheless, whilst some punk bands were fairly justified in claiming they had rejected the class-competitive world of 'being on top', and a fair number of punks were and are from a working class background, neither can be said of Clash vocalist Joe Strummer.¹⁰⁵ Strummer personally took some interest in socialism and class politics, but punk's attitude towards the dole queue and the work system can reasonably be said to operate very differently from that of socialist protest-folk singers.

¹⁰⁴ The Clash, 'Career Opportunities', *The Clash*, LP, CBS, CBS 32232, 1977. The Specials' 'Nite Klub', *The Specials*, LP, Chrysalis, CHR 1265, 1979 takes up the same theme: 'I won't work, 'cos I don't want to, I don't have to work, there's no work to do'. Alternative TV's 'Life', *Selected Viewing*, Anagram, GRAM 40, 1989 was one of the earliest 'first wave' songs to help punk earn its reputation as 'dole-queue rock': 'life's about as wonderful as a dole queue, I don't like standing still with the tramps and layabouts... but I've got no choice, that's why I'm standing in the queue...'. But these are, of course, only a few examples from the many in the punk/new-wave/post-punk era: the Smiths' 'Still Ill', *The Smiths*, Rough Trade, ROUGH 61, 1984 ('England is mine and it owes me a living... If you must go to work tomorrow, well, if I were you, I wouldn't bother...') maintained the anti-work sentiment in the mid-1980s; it can still be heard today in the lyrics of punk bands such as Milky Wimpshake.

¹⁰⁵ Strummer was the public-school-educated son of a wealthy diplomat. His group's notorious manager Bernie Rhodes made sure the group achieved and maintained a position at the top of the major-label punk scene. Beguilingly enough, Strummer, real name John Mellors, had taken enough interest in folk music as a pre-punk teenager to have self-chosen the nickname 'Woody', *Mojo* Magazine, issue 151, June, 2006, p. 82. We can note, with regard to Strummer's inherited class position, that many folk musicians are also from middle-class backgrounds, it should perhaps be mentioned.

From where, it seems worth asking, does this difference derive? A pattern of historical forces must surely come into play here. Nuttall's argument that the shadow of 'the bomb' delimits a pre- and post-nuclear generation gap has some usefulness in such an analysis. The response to Bob Dylan's decision to pick up an electric guitar, for example, seems to have contributed to the generation of that gap in the mid-1960s, whilst the Sex Pistols' cry that 'anarchy in the UK is coming sometime, maybe' appears to have done similar work in the mid-70s.¹⁰⁶ Yet, as discussed above, the 'gap' is not absolute and individuals from a younger or older generation can, in fact, leap across it. Thus a young punk like Billy Bragg could choose socialism over the anarchistic positioning more commonly associated with the punk movement; an older person who had reached puberty prior to 1945 such as William S. Burroughs could be respected by and to some extent involved in the 'hippie' movement; and the youthful faces shown in the archive footage from Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home* documentary can criticise Bob Dylan's turn to rock in a manner which disproves any absolute homology between age and taste, or 'generation' (period of birth) and generational character (specific combinations of cultural and political preferences and/ or allegiances).¹⁰⁷

The last-mentioned case is perhaps worth hanging on to. Why *did* those audiences 'boo' so vociferously throughout Dylan's electric performances? The incident was repeated at every concert Dylan played in the mid-1965 to 1966 period, it seems, yet the folk-faithful fans' mode of disapproval has itself been criticised since, time and

¹⁰⁶ Sex Pistols, 'Anarchy in the UK', *Bollocks*, 1978.

¹⁰⁷ *No Direction*, Scorsese, 2005.

again. Could it be that here was a *political* change of emphasis with the *stylistic* development ('Dylan goes electric/rock') being largely incidental? Or, alternatively, might the surprising shift in musical framework actually *complement* that political change? Another possibility: should we just accept the break from the established (acoustic and solo or small ensemble) instrumentation of a music genre as a purely musical decision with little or no political significance?

Dylan's use of electric amplification has had many extravagant claims made for it, including a comparison to the first performance of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre Du Printemps* – a bold claim, given that the twelve bar blues structures and instrumental techniques behind most of Dylan's 1965-6 output were highly standardised and decidedly unremarkable.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, Matt Callahan has gone even further by proposing electric-Dylan as containing literally no trace whatsoever of any musical developments from the century which preceded the 1965 Newport Folk Festival: 'a musical artist of great eloquence [Dylan]... exploded into something new, obedient to none of the formulas and theories of the past 100 years'.¹⁰⁹ The claim is surprising, given that 'Maggie's Farm' – the song with which Dylan opened his set in Newport '65 – is a jaunty, blues-rock song with some quite clever rhymes in it. What is supposed to have been so 'new' about the performance, beyond the cultural context, is difficult to see.¹¹⁰ Why the introduction of a rock style to a folk context should be intrinsically radical, furthermore, is far from clear.

¹⁰⁸ Bob Dylan, *Bob Dylan Live 1966: The 'Royal Albert Hall' Concert*, Columbia, CB772-DCF-2CDC, 1998.

¹⁰⁹ Callahan, Mat, *The Trouble With Music* (Edinburgh: AK, 2005), p.157.

¹¹⁰ Richard Middleton has effectively noted this, writing about 'what seemed – *wrongly* – a radical change of style [when Dylan, in 1965] adopted the format of the modern city blues band and

Many of the most hysterical proclamations of Dylan's genius have centred upon the song 'Like A Rolling Stone'. For contrast, therefore, I shall examine instead 'Desolation Row', an even longer but less renowned piece.¹¹¹ 'Desolation Row' was put to tape scant days after Dylan's first appearance with an 'electric' group had caused him to get booed off stage at the Newport Folk Festival – an annual festival which had previously received him in 1963 and '64 with a rapture that had in large part set him up as the leading voice of the period's folk scene. Greil Marcus has reported that Bob Johnston, producer of the *Highway 61* album in which 'Desolation Row' takes the important position of closing track, 'took [the song] as Dylan's reply to his enemies at Newport'.¹¹² This assessment was probably based on the kind of burnt-at-the-stake-by-a-righteous-mob imagery found particularly strongly in the eighth verse:

At midnight all the agents and the superhuman crew
 come out and round up everyone that knows more than they do
 and they bring them to the factory where the heart-attack machine
 is strapped across their shoulders and then the kerosene
 is brought down from the castles by insurance men who go
 check to see nobody is escaping to Desolation Row.

introduced timbres, rhythms and forms similar to those of the modern city style', Middleton, Richard, *Pop Music and the Blues: A Study of the Relationship and its Significance* (London: Gollancz, 1972), p.180, emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Bob Dylan, 'Desolation Row', *Highway 61 Revisited*, Columbia, CB-701-CDM, 1967.

¹¹² Marcus, *Like a*, p.159.

Dylan is widely reported to have been ‘stunned and distressed’ by the Newport incident and it should not therefore be difficult to interpret the mood of hurt and hostility in the song as a product of his recent experience.¹¹³ If Dylan was referring to himself as ‘one who knows more than they do’, it is likely that the reference to the protagonist’s capturers as ‘superhuman’ is a deliberate counterpoint to such a superiority complex – that is, extrapolating a little from this reading, the folk purists demand a level of solidarity (in ‘the factory’) which is actually above human nature. The singer, meanwhile, ‘knows’ – what? Knows, perhaps, that Desolation Row, a place which is mentioned at the end of each of the song’s many verses, is a potential escape (for the working class, perhaps?) from the factory which the insurance men (the archetypal middle class profession) in their ivory castles (from which the leading voices in the period’s folk scene were criticising Dylan’s change of direction, might we say?) would seek to close off.

Getting a feel for the ‘location’ of Desolation Row is crucial to any attempt to apprehend the song’s meaning, then. Al Kooper, sometime Dylan accompanist, has stated that geographical pin-pointing is in fact possible: on New York’s Eighth Avenue, ‘an area infested with whore houses, sleazy bars, and porno-supermarkets totally beyond renovation and redemption’.¹¹⁴ Marcus has proposed, partly on the basis of this information, that ‘it’s a bohemian paradise’.¹¹⁵ Wherever ‘Desolation Row’ can be found, however, it seems fair to presume that to ‘escape’ into such a place of drugs, sex and despair is not a transition which the idealistic, socialistic,

¹¹³ Shelton, *Direction*, p.304.

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Marcus, *Like a*, p.171.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*: p.172.

traditionalist folk scene represented by Pete Seeger and his ilk would like to see made by ‘the folk’. Even if we share this hope, though, perhaps Dylan’s suggestion here is that to resist that escapist temptation requires the moral strength of the ‘superhuman’ which, down in the dirty (real?) world of Desolation Row, is not in the nature of the ordinary human.

What is it to be ‘desolate’? Desolation implies destruction, wretchedness, misery, certainly. To be desolate, it seems fair to add, is to be utterly alone in that misery. And the song ‘Desolation Row’, it is also probably fair to say, is about as far as one can get from the optimistic belief in the power of collective solidarity expressed in, for example, ‘We Shall Overcome’.¹¹⁶ With that in mind, it is worth now observing the opening lines of the verse which falls directly after the one quoted above:

Praise be to Nero’s Neptune,
the Titanic sails at dawn,
everybody’s shouting *‘Which side are you on?’*

There can be little doubt that Dylan would have been aware of the Florence Reece song which Pete Seeger, the Almanac Singers and many other had been singing on picket lines and elsewhere for decades by that point. The mention of one of protest music’s most well-known song titles almost certainly would have helped bring Dylan’s sound engineer Bob Johnston to the conclusion mentioned earlier, namely that ‘Desolation Row’ amounts to a riposte by Dylan to his critics from the traditional folk scene. Dylan associate (and, it has been argued, sycophant) Robert Shelton had

¹¹⁶ Pete Seeger, ‘We Shall Overcome’, *Hammer*, 1988.

probably also noticed the significance of the reference when he wrote that ‘Dylan makes a shambles of simpleminded political commitment. What difference which side you’re on if you’re sailing on the Titanic?’¹¹⁷

Whether it is Florence Reece personally, singers such as Pete Seeger who would promote her cause or striking miners in general whom Shelton considers ‘simpleminded’ is not entirely clear. Any of these people, however, might respond that it makes a great deal of difference when it is a person, or a collection of people, who are causing your ship to sink, rather than an iceberg.¹¹⁸ ‘Which Side Are You On?’ is a song about solidarity, designed for collective performance. It is, if anything is, a folksong. Is ‘Desolation Row’?

Within certain parameters of musical interpretation, it is more so than any other song on the album it concludes. It is the only performance which does not feature a full backing band. Instead it replaces the twelve bar blues-based jams which structure most of the preceding tracks from *Highway 61 Revisited* with an understatedly-

¹¹⁷ Shelton, *Direction*, p.283. Intriguingly enough, an *NME* article entitled ‘The Titanic Sails at Dawn’ was ‘predicting what would happen with punk’ in 1976, Gorman, Paul, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press* (London: MPG, 2001), p.205. It is almost certain that the title was a deliberate invocation of Dylan’s ‘Desolation Row’.

¹¹⁸ For a fascinating and detailed reading of ‘Desolation Row’, see Dave Harker, *One for the Money: Politics and Popular Song* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp.136-43. Harker’s analysis resonates strongly with the one I make here, noting that Dylan’s work from this period ‘hits the sitting ducks [but] leaves the vultures unmolested’ (p.145). With regard to the specific question ‘which side are you on?’, however, Harker does find a shred of optimism, arguing that Dylan ‘still *wants* to know which side he *can* be on, believes that such a side exists’ (p.141).

strummed sequence of open chords (the tonic chord frequently augmented with fourth-note suspensions in typical folk style) from Dylan, accompanied by a delicately-plucked melodic part on a second guitar.¹¹⁹ Both are acoustic; the only other instruments are Dylan's voice and mouth organ. Aside from its exceptional length and the apparent targets of its acerbic lyrics, the song could have appeared on any of Dylan's earlier albums without sounding out of place.

Nevertheless, Greil Marcus hears a hint of the 'threat... promise... demand' of 'Like A Rolling Stone' when 'Dylan snaps ['Desolation Row'] into its last verse with three harsh, percussive bangs on his acoustic guitar'.¹²⁰ Perhaps this suggests that Dylan's use of the rock-band format genuinely was born of musical preference: no longer was the solo acoustic guitar enough for the performer, he *demand*s more. Implicit in the cries of 'sell out' is the idea that Dylan's change was more political than musical in nature. Was it? Certainly 'Desolation Row' has, in many of its lyrics, a strong flavour of hostility directed towards, it seems likely, folk authenticists or, perhaps less controversially, towards those who would live outside of Desolation Row (whatever/wherever that is). Thematically, the song's words move towards a sense of (inevitable?) *individual* desolation and despair contrasts strongly with the sense of collective, *generational* optimism clearly present in earlier Dylan songs such as 'The Times They Are A-Changing', 'Blowin' In The Wind' and others. If Marcus is to be

¹¹⁹ The chords of the song are actually the tonic, sub-dominant and dominant chords one would expect to find in any twelve bar blues. The sixteen bar structure in an approximate AABA (the last four bars actually vary a little from the two statements of the sequence in the opening 8 bars, but only in subtle ways), however, coupled with the minimal instrumentation on non-amplified instruments gives an aural impression which most informed, Western listeners would quickly identify as 'folky'.

¹²⁰ Marcus, *Like a*, p.175.

believed, this loss of optimism leaks through into the actual, *threatening* musical sound. Given the song's context on Dylan's otherwise-all-electric LP (not forgetting, also, its lyrics), 'Desolation Row' may have been, perhaps unconsciously, a pastiche of Dylan's earlier style and, therefore, of the entire 'protest-folk' scene of which he was, despite his personal wishes (he has claimed), regarded as the leader. Perhaps, though, the not yet twenty five year old Dylan just wanted to rock, was simply tired of his established format. This possibility should always be kept in mind, since the documentary evidence of Dylan at this time suggests a young man who was both shocked and perhaps rather frightened by the intense hostility he had provoked: the idea that Sixties icons such as Dylan and the Beatles were operating to some mystical, precognitive plan should of course be looked at critically by the serious commentator.

Whatever the motivation for his turn to amplified guitar, by the time of his 1968 LP *John Wesley Harding* Dylan had 'retreated', as a vernacular critic might well put it, into a sound which could easily be described as folky and traditional, as compared with the rock-ish, bluesy *Blonde on Blonde* material.¹²¹ He would never return to the kind of consistently liberal sentiments of his early LPs, however.¹²² Clearly, then, a strict correlation of musical style and 'political' motivation would (in every case) be far too homological. What, it is nevertheless worth asking, is the substance of the 'threat... promise... demand' which Marcus heard? That is to ask, what is going on in

¹²¹ Bob Dylan, *John Wesley Harding*, CBS, 63252, 1968; Bob Dylan, *Blonde on Blonde*, CBS, CDCBS 22130, 1966.

¹²² Thus occasional glimpses of topical writing, such as 'Hurricane', *Desire*, Columbia/Sony, CD32570, 1975, which criticises the 'all-white jury' that condemned a real-life boxer to life imprisonment for a crime he almost certainly did not commit, are rare occurrences amongst a large catalogue of albums.

that moment of synchrony between instrumental performance and, according to Marcus, the mood/‘message’ of the musical performance? How, to spin it again, does that communication take place – from an individual (‘Bob Dylan’) to an individual (‘Greil Marcus’), or via a system of communicative processes which is more plural than that suggested by such a simple transmission-reception model? These questions of subjectivity and emotional expressivity in music form the basis of the next chapter. Before that discussion, I wish to return briefly to the idea that Dylan’s mid-1960s change of direction might have been, in some cultural/historical/political sense, a bridge between punk and folk music scenes, or at least between socialism and anarchism.

With this possibility in mind, it would be opportunist to make too much of Ewan MacColl’s criticism in 1965 that Dylan’s ‘poetry is punk’ or, for that matter, of the famous moment at the end of the *Don’t Look Back* documentary, filmed in the same year, where a bewildered Dylan is informed that the British newspapers are calling him an ‘anarchist’.¹²³ Yet an anarchistic, post-socialist, individual-centred political positioning is clearly detectable in Dylan’s lyrics from around the time of his ‘shocking’ (as in punk?) musical change in the mid-1960s. Thus his comments about the intra-solidarity of those who

on principle baptise

¹²³ MacColl is thus quoted in Harper, p.174. Dylan’s response to the information that he has been so described by the newspapers – ‘give the anarchist a cigarette!’, he declares with bemusement – would eventually provide the name for a book by Mick Farren, *Give the Anarchist a Cigarette* (London: Johnathon Cape, 2001).

strict party-platform ties,
 social clubs in drag disguise,
 outsiders they can truly criticise¹²⁴

can easily be read as a critique of the civil rights activists with whom he had linked arms in sympathy one year earlier, whilst the subsequent reference to

one who sings with his tongue on fire...
 bent out of shape by society's pliers...
 gets you down in the hole that he's in¹²⁵

resonates strongly with the theme of individual despair we saw in 'Desolation Row'. In brief, a case can be put forward for post-protest Dylan as an early usher of certain crucial values/attitudes of the punk era. With this interpretation, punk's alleged antipathy towards 'hippies' might best be reconfigured as either envy at their success or, more likely, despair at their failure. The latter makes sense because, for example, a belief that 'the bomb' represents madness is commonly found in punk – only the 'circle-A' anarchy sign beats the CND symbol for popularity on the 'old school' punk rocker's leather-jacket; for another example, the counter-cultural squats which housed many of the first wave punks were figuratively, and often actually, a continuation from the 1960s 'hippie' scene.

¹²⁴ Bob Dylan, 'It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)', *Bringing It All Back Home*, CBS, 62515, 1965.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, my emphasis: the movement from the 'social club' to the individual 'one' is crucial to the reading I am making here.

Punk, then, might be configured as a *continuation* from the hippies and their counter-culture rather than a break with the earlier movement, as noted by McKay (see above). Punk is certainly not entirely separate from the socialist side of the folk tradition, furthermore. Crass, for example, though their rhetoric marks them as anarchists – ‘Left-wing, Right-wing, you can stuff the lot’ is one memorably provocative line that probably sums up their position fairly well¹²⁶ – actually shared many concerns in common with folk-singers of their day such as Dick Gaughan (see above). Punk’s pro-DIY, anti-major underground has much in common with the grassroots folk scene – in either case, performers might well book their own gigs, carry their own gear and sleep on the floors of friends and acquaintances, as a matter of operational similarity.

Yet there are clear differences between punk and folk in political terms (as well as the more obvious musical details). An anarchistic or individualistic ideal seems to be stronger in punk than in folk in political terms (‘punk means being true to yourself’ being an idea which one can often hear repeated in the punk scene). ‘Traditionalism’, in folk meanwhile, often encompasses both musical conservatism and also, sometimes, a commitment to a political approach which one could configure as conservito-socialist (be true to the tradition, essentially). To clarify, when the Levellers, self-proclaimed as a punk/folk cross-over group, sang ‘there’s only one way of life, and that’s your own...’ on an anthemic hit single in the early 1990s, it is fair to say that, at the lyrical level at least, they were reflecting the punk side of their

¹²⁶ Crass, ‘White Punks On Hope’, *Stations of the Crass*, Crass Records, 521984, 1979. ‘Middle class, working class, it’s all a load of shit’ juts out as a lyric on another song from the same record.

background more than the folk side.¹²⁷ On the other hand, when Billy Bragg accompanied his adaptation of ‘Which Side Are You On?’ with a cranked-up and choppily-played electric guitar at numerous striking-miner’s benefit gigs in 1984, no cries of ‘judas’ have been reported. Bearing all this in mind, the common placement of Bragg’s records in the record stores’ folk bins is well-justified since his openly socialist ideals reflect the principal ideological orientation of post-war folk.

In general, then, punk has answered the question ‘which side are you on?’ solipsistically: not so much ‘my side’ as ‘nobody’s side’ or, to put it another way, ‘no consistent side’ (such as, for example, the working class side). An interesting endnote on this matter, as regards Florence Reece’s famous song, is the title of a recent pre-concert talk by David Keenan at the Sage Gateshead. Keenan is a well-established promoter of the avant-garde, experimental side of the contemporary DIY underground. Setting the mood for a programme featuring recorded performances by resurrected-from-obscurity 1960s folkie/traveller Vashti Bunyan and contemporary doyen of the so-called ‘nu-folk’ scene Adem, Keenan name-checked a wide range of musical reference points including: folk legends such as Margaret Barry, Harry Smith and his *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Alan Lomax and Shirley Collins; punk-orientated groups and individuals including Current 93, Jandek, The Skaters and Throbbing Gristle; and, significantly I believe, jazz experimentalists Sun Ra, John

¹²⁷ The Levellers, ‘One Way’, *One Way of Life: The Best of the Levellers*, Warner/Eastwest, 3984250992, 2002. Many punks from the underground scene would doubtless object to a major label group such as this being described as ‘punk’. Nevertheless, the quoted line reflects the kind of personal-is-political ethos commonly found in underground rhetoric. The television footage of thousands of people singing the line together whilst bouncing up and down at Glastonbury does bring Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* (‘we are all individuals...’) to mind, however.

Coltrane and Albert Ayler. Publicised in advance as an exposition on the subject of ‘free folk’, the talk did not make it entirely clear what this twenty first century coinage actually connotes, though general themes seemed to be: that it is also sometimes known as ‘outsider folk’ (begging the question - what would ‘insider folk’ be constituted by? Pete Seeger, perhaps? The idea would seem peculiar, given his McCarthy-era blacklisted-status); that it involved the meeting of ‘high-brow’ and ‘low-brow’ in a manner which appears to be consistent with well-established post-modern theory; that ‘free folk’ could mean ‘liberated people’ (though any interest in *liberating* people was not mentioned during the talk); that it is constituted today by people ‘putting it together themselves’ through networking; that the latter tendency has been facilitated by technological innovations such as e-mail and home-producible CD-Rs (though Keenan acknowledged, when I brought this up during the post-talk question and answer session, that this was only really a continuation from the cassettes and conventional postage system which have sustained underground music for decades); that it is ‘the sound of a community outside the mainstream’, with the Beatles being the only music-producers mentioned to definitely *not* be ‘free folk’; that, being communal music, it is collective in nature though not always in terms of musical practice (Jandek, for example, is an individual artist – though sometimes accompanied - as are many if not most others who appear on Keenan’s mail-order distribution list);¹²⁸ and that it involves improvisation because, according to David Keenan (rather contentiously, I should think, though it does make some sense in certain cases) ‘the folk impulse is improvisatory’. In many ways, then, this term ‘free folk’ uses its second term in contexts which would seem to contradict many traditional understandings of what folk is. The title of the talk, perhaps drawing a final

¹²⁸ Volcanic Tongue distribution, www.volcanictongue.com

line under Florence Reece's question as well as somewhat echoing the post-socialist ideas of, for example, Francis Fukuyama, was 'Both Sides = Now'.¹²⁹

Section Summary

An important element of similarity between punk and folk is a general attempt to encourage amateurs and to 'break down the barrier between the audience and the band'. Whilst this attempt is demonstrable in both fields, the 'floor singing' tradition associated with folk music would seem to be the strongest case for a claim to have achieved such a thing. That said, folk singers such as Kate Rusby and many others have 'professionalised' the folk scene to a notable extent, whilst some underground punk-orientated bands, such as the Evens amongst others, have maintained an arguably stronger connection between audience and performer. Punk and folk have much in common, then, yet there would seem to remain great political differences between the two. These differences may be manifestations of certain shifting allegiances and influences within the Left in the post-war period, furthermore. An analysis of Bob Dylan's 'Desolation Row' would seem to suggest that his turn from 'protest folk' to 'electric rock' may have been an early reflection of this shift. To this extent, one might see Dylan's mid-1960s transformation as something of a bridge between musical and political eras, with folk music and socialism being dominant in the first decades after World War II but the traditions of punk, with their ostensibly

¹²⁹ It is possible that Keenan intended only to gesture at Joni Mitchell's famous 'Both Sides Now' and quite possible that he intended no reference to the song 'Which Side Are You On?'. Given that his talk referred to 'folk' throughout, however, his title certainly feels like an answer to the question posed by Florence Reece's famous song.

anarchistic tendencies, becoming increasingly common amongst the Left at large from the 1970s onwards.

iv. Conclusion

In punk, it is often supposed that anyone can do it. In the punk underground, this ‘it’ has often been desired as a combination of inclusivity, amateurism and anarchism. We will see, in chapters three and four, that such a combination has not *always* been desired. More often than not, nevertheless, such an aspiration has been in place: a desire for an environment where, even if only for a moment, a non-hierarchical environment can be felt to have arrived.

In the present chapter, we have also seen that many have considered these traditions of punk to have something in common with folk music. The common element has often been identified as a welcoming to inclusivity, a belief that anyone can do it. Most differences between punk and folk have been shown to be light rather than hard, despite the surface appearance of great musical and cultural difference. In terms of political ethos, the gap is perhaps at its widest. This political difference is far from rigid, however. It could be argued, for example, without too much controversy, that Bert Jansch exhibited some punk attributes when he stated that ‘I couldn’t be attached to one [political] party or another’.¹³⁰ His guitar playing has been praised as being ‘individualistic’ precisely because it veers from tradition, we should also note. Meanwhile a punk band from a working-class background such as Sham 69, in their combination of the somewhat *collectivist* claim that ‘if the kids are united they will never be divided’ with a comfortably familiar I-IV-V-I harmony, can reasonably be

¹³⁰ Harper, *Dazzling*, p.191. The guitarist’s friend John Challis’s claim that Jansch’s playing style was unique to him – ‘it was *his*, it was his thing’ (ibid: p.131, emphasis retained from original) – is a commonly held view.

said to reflect some elements of the folk tradition.¹³¹ To describe Bert Jansch as a punk artist or Sham 69 as a folk group, however, would be to empty these generic terms of their meaning as actually applied in the vernacular.

Clear differences between these two musical fields on grounds of *politicisation*, then, can be felt even though, when considered more deeply, they figure as generally distinct rather than as any absolute dichotomy. That general difference can be delineated as, in folk music, a tendency towards socialism (in terms of its own discourse and praxis, for example its general support for unionism and the interests of the working classes, as well as in many cases its explicit allegiance) and, in punk, towards an anarchistic ideal. Punk bands often speak out against ‘the system’ and the establishment. In the underground, punks have sometimes attempted to confront certain authoritarian systems including, obviously, the music industry itself but, also, with anarcho-punk in particular, specific institutions outside of the music scene.

Bob Dylan’s turn to rock and electric amplification around 1965 shows that something surprising and ostensibly new can thereby gain a certain political ramification precisely due to its apparent novelty. Dylan’s move was considered to be somewhat anarchic in its day, as we have seen. His turn away from the socialistic and often Marxist protest folk scene can, in a certain sense, be considered as a component within a larger cultural swing. It also appears likely that 1970s punk (‘Anarchy in the UK’ and all that) was a continuation of this swing; this would seem particularly clear, indeed, in that the later traditions of punk we will encounter in chapters three and four

¹³¹ Sham 69, ‘If the Kids Are United’, *If the Kids Are United: The Very Best of Sham 69*, Anagram, CDPUNK118, 2004.

can also be considered as movements away from the socialist/Marxist tradition. In chapter two, we will learn that recent philosophical discourses around politics, subjectivity and communality have also made the anarchistic challenge to Marxist orthodoxy a hot topic for some academics in recent years. For the time being, we can at least note that novelty, tradition and politics would seem to interact in ways which are not always straightforward, and that a search for something ostentatiously new, in the cultural sphere, can work effectively against the standard strategies of the socialist/Marxist component of the Left.

The first section of the present chapter, meanwhile, would seem to indicate that it might not be so easy to accomplish a desired anarchistic sidestepping with regard to dominant power (for what else is this desire for the underground to always already be an evasion of ‘the mainstream’?). The desire to make the step is valuable in itself, for the Left, of course. Perhaps to avoid dominant power requires a more rigorous consideration of what power *is*, however. Such a consideration will be undertaken in the following chapter, with a particular focus on our key term *empowerment*.

As an addendum, it should be noted that both folk and punk can of course sometimes shift to the Right. The nationalistic streak within folklore, for example, has provoked many accusations of a highly illiberal form of parochialism which has figured, on occasion, as something very close to racism. The punk movement, on the other hand, has a very small but nevertheless worrying number of self-proclaimed neo-Nazi bands who consider fascism to be an adequate fit with their interpretation of the punk ethos. The problematic connection between folk and nationalism has been challenged many times from within the movement at large, however, whilst the Dead Kennedys’ classic

single 'Nazi Punks, Fuck Off' is a well-known insistence of the anti-fascism which has far outweighed any punk tendencies towards the Right in practice.¹³²

Punk, then, has more often than not tended to the Left; has aimed for a micro-collective movement against dominant power; and has aspired that anyone can do it. The crucial question, for chapter two, is: who can this anyone be? Can any anyone assist any other anyone to do it? When, perhaps most importantly, will we know that some other anyone has done it? What should we call this moment? Deciding that this moment has arrived, we may find, is to attempt to decide the undecidable, to attempt to make present that which has to remain yet to come. Since punks such as Crass have dared to talk of 'anarchy and freedom', however, such questions have to be worth asking in the present context.

¹³² Dead Kennedys, 'Nazi Punks, Fuck Off', (Alternative Tentacles, Virus 6, 1980).

Chapter Two: Can Any *One* Do 'It'?

Punk has certain consistent operational tendencies, especially in its underground form, as highlighted in chapter one. It also has a supposed similarity to the folk tradition, in its ostensibly inclusive belief that 'anyone can do it'. Folk differs from punk, nevertheless, by tending towards socialist and Marxist aspirations whereas punk's determined faith in 'independence' from and alterity to the mainstream reflects a firmly anarchist tendency. Folk artists also tend to care little for novelty, and when Bob Dylan took what appeared to be a novel approach circa 1965, the challenge to tradition was perceived to have clear political implications.

In chapter two, this tension between Marxism and anarchism will be explored more deeply, drawing on the theories of Derrida and other recent thinkers in order to examine the function of novelty in any search for political justice. In the first section, I will offer brief examples of punk's commitment to both novelty and anarchistic communality before giving some detail as to how these relate to tropes of avant-gardism, vanguardism and modernity. Examining these tropes critically by drawing on philosophies of originality and self-presentation, I go on in the second section to summarise Marxist and anarchist theories. The tension between these is shown to balance upon 'foundationalist' desire for universality. The resistance of continental philosophers to foundationalism, especially after May '68, will be referred to punk's cultural/historical situation and the movement's generally 'post-Marxist' tendencies. In the third and final section, I will offer more philosophical detail as to the Derridean concept of justice and its relation to certain crucial ethical and political questions. Subsequent to this detail, I offer a somewhat deconstructive reading of Derrida's work

on the 'recoil', using this reading as the basis of my conception of the micromatic recoil which I argue has often been desired and perhaps sometimes practised within the punk underground.

i. Punk, Avant-gardism and Novelty

Does music still matter? Yes, making music is no doubt something that new-wave postpunk bands feel like they have to do but what pricks are they kicking against? Doesn't this kind of music have to be doing something new and be saying something to matter? Otherwise there is no point. You are making something to a preconceived pattern. It is just handicrafts, not art.¹

The above e-mail, printed in a national music magazine, sums up very neatly a perceived necessity for what we can reasonably term *novelty* in art generally (and, here, 'postpunk' music specifically): as the final two sentences make clear, you have to be 'doing something new' before you can 'be saying something' and thus 'matter' ('otherwise there is no point').

The first section of the present chapter aims to examine carefully the extent to which we can accept this supposition. Is there 'no point' in handicrafts? It should be obvious that the agents of the folk *oeuvre* discussed in chapter one would argue otherwise. In folk, the point of 'making something to a preconceived pattern' is, we can summarise, to contribute to a tradition, to take that tradition forward whilst, significantly, gaining a certain *self-satisfaction* (notions of the constitution of 'self' will be crucial in the present chapter). Since the usual critique of folk's authenticist tendency is predicated on the belief that traditions have no purity in their content and are therefore always in flux, it follows necessarily that folk art must be 'saying *something*'. Only if the handicraft based on the preconceived pattern was perfectly identical to that 'original'

¹ Letters page, *Observer Music Magazine* issue 39, November 2006, p.8.

pattern could the folk artist be claimed to be saying *nothing*. This being impossible to conceive – as the critics of the conception of folk authenticity have been quick to point out – it follows that folk art (‘handicrafts’) *is* art of some sort, not its antithesis, since it is certainly saying at least something to, in practice, quite a large number of somebodies.

The critical dimension here, then, is where this ‘saying something’ derives from. The letter-writer quoted above takes it as read that ‘something new’ is the only something worth saying; without being new, her letter seems to suggest music cannot ‘matter’, has ‘no point’, by implication has no substance beyond the characterless re-presentation of an object identical to some anterior ‘preconceived’ original. It is relevant to note, in the light of what I will be saying later in this chapter, that a woman’s name is attached to the letter. Her view is consistent with a commonly held opinion within punk and post-punk movements, including the bulk of the international punk underground as defined in chapter one as well as other commentaries.

George McKay, for example, has noted punk’s ‘stress on its newness and difference’, arguing that the ‘DiY’ (short for ‘Do it Yourself’) impetus towards novelty is both a strength and a weakness.² With the term DiY, McKay wants to signal the kinds of broadly anarchistic protest movements of the last few decades which, more recently, have often been branded as ‘the anti-globalisation movement’.³ In keeping with my

² McKay, *Senseless*, pp.119-120; it should be acknowledged that McKay argues that the ‘stress’ he mentions in these pages is found in ‘rave’ and other post-1960s cultures of resistance as well as punk.

³ He suggests that the protest movements/periodicals/groups in question – Reclaim the Streets, Green Anarchist, Friends of the Earth and suchlike – were describing themselves as DiY in the 1990s.

general view, McKay states that punk has been a crucial element of DiY, giving the term ‘a greater currency in alternative culture’, and especially so in the case of Crass and the anarcho-punk movement which offered a particularly vital stimulation to post-1960s protest movements.⁴ Crass, for example, provided ‘an awkward combination of ahistorical arrogance and a more positively opportunistic construction of anarchism around the newness, the perceived radical difference of punk’.⁵ For McKay, this promotion of newness in punk and DiY provides ‘sources of energy, vision, creativity’ for the Left.⁶ In addition to this stimulatory potential, however, he clearly feels ambivalent as to the benefit the Left might draw from this demand for ‘novelty’.⁷ The problem, in short, is that although ‘DiY has a real strength in its capacity to empower’, the empowerment gained is undermined by ‘DiY culture’s project of newness’.⁸ The ‘politics of Do It Yourself, of self-empowerment’, in other words, are often undermined by ‘a slightly disturbing and insistent rhetoric of newness’.⁹ McKay is disturbed by this rhetoric because, as noted in chapter one above, he wants to argue overall that post-1960s cultures of resistance are to a significant extent analogous with ‘historic folk events’ such as the Fairs/‘Fayres’ of the (‘possibly invented’, he acknowledges) past.¹⁰

⁴ McKay, *DiY*, p.25.

⁵ McKay, *Senseless*, p.98. McKay devotes an entire chapter to Crass and anarcho-punk.

⁶ *Ibid*: p.162.

⁷ McKay, *DiY*, p.37. McKay is surprised to find that the promotion of this element of novelty in DiY cultures ‘has been understated by observers’; hopefully my research helps to rectify this problem.

⁸ *Ibid*: p.45.

⁹ *Ibid*: p.19, emphasis retained, for the first quotation; McKay, *Senseless*, p.183 for the second.

¹⁰ McKay, *Senseless*, p.35.

If McKay is right (and I believe he is), then punk, as a prime example of DiY culture, sits uneasily between tradition and novelty: the promotion of newness provides a certain self-empowerment and yet simultaneously undermines crucial elements of the Left's larger tradition (DiY's lack of consistent class-analysis seems to be one of his critical concerns, for example).¹¹ Punk, in other words, is *avant-gardist* in the sense that it often seems to lead with the shock of the new; it often includes a presumed necessity of new-ness despite the frequent claims of punk as a folk music (as noted in chapter one above). Folk artists, by contrast, have often been part of the Left's more traditional *vanguard*, as noted in chapter one; being folk artists, however, they will not practise the modernist approach often associated with the term 'avant-garde' (despite the etymological connection). Folk art, as normally understood, indeed, often proposes effectively that *avant-gardists have merely pretended to present a new world in different ways: the point, however, is not to change it* – or at least, not for pretentious reasons. The folk artist, the upholder of handicrafts and other traditions, would seem able to take a significant self-satisfaction from their productive agency *despite* the apparent lack of novelty, in other words. Even critics of folk's tendency towards 'authenticity' would seem to agree that the tradition will change in significant ways in the hands of the folk artist. Perhaps there, then, resides the self-satisfaction which makes punk-style avant-gardism and folk artistry *polarities* rather than opposites: both seem to search for a sense of 'self' yet clearly they do this in radically differing ways, for their attitudes towards novelty and tradition are patently different.

The above allusion to *XI* of the *Theses on Feuerbach* will be far from the last occasion that Marx will haunt this chapter, for a large part of my purpose here is to expand

¹¹ For McKay's concerns over DiY's lack of concern for class analysis, see *DiY*, pp.45-51.

certain political themes hinted at in chapter one's ruminations on the question 'Which Side Are You On?'¹² As we saw, Florence Reece's question became a rallying cry within unionised, working class communities. When the question was rendered by a 'post-Newport' Bob Dylan, however, at least one commentator came to the conclusion that the erstwhile folksinger was comparing the 'simpleminded' Leftists of the folk scene to passengers upon the Titanic (see chapter one above). Robert Shelton, who made this claim for Dylan, was not alone in supposing the singer to have turned his back on the traditional Left. The punk movement, from the 1970s onwards, furthermore, can be interpreted to have maintained this turning away motion, perhaps even to have bared its backside to the socialist/Marxist tradition. For the punks, generally speaking, class issues are of limited significance if any, for example. It has always been possible for the bourgeois classes to integrate into the punk community, provided that clothing, behaviour and accent are suitably adjusted (Joe Strummer of the Clash being a classic example, as noted in chapter one). This is because, in the punk underground, 'community' is often instead conceived not in terms of class but rather in terms of a certain mode of empowerment:

All vanguards are cadres of the selfish, preening themselves in the future's fond spotlight. The purest expression of punk community may be the refusal to reach out, to express the desire that the community should continue, to set out obligations of duty towards its nurturing... the micro-community must be taken

¹² The concluding thesis *XI* of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* is that 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however is to change it', Reiss, Edward, *Marx: A Clear Guide* (London: Pluto, 1997), p.85. See previous paragraph above for the allusion in question.

to exist somehow by chance alone, never design. To want it, to build towards it, is to betray it.¹³

For Mark Sinker, who wrote these words, the unmistakably Marxist-Leninist terms ‘vanguard’ and ‘cadres’ would seem to be suspect indeed. Punk, he seems to be saying, resists community; the only way *not* to betray the others within a punk community is if and only if that community exists ‘by chance’. The punk ‘micro-community’, to use Sinker’s descriptor, despite its refusal to ‘express the desire [to] continue’ and despite its ‘refusal to reach out’, is not betrayed when and only when its existence is aleatoric.

The idea is in fact quite radical, philosophically: relations without betrayal, thus perhaps social relations without power relations; a locus of *justice*, we might want to argue. Yet Sinker seems to want to risk a disappearance of this justice just as it is glimpsed, with his insistence upon avoiding ‘nurturing’ or enlarging the community (or even wanting it to ‘continue’, indeed). ‘The purest expression of punk community’ seems here to be an enormous denial: denial of ‘desire’, denial of ‘obligations’ to the community. His argument does follow crucial elements of the punk idea, however, for to try to ‘build towards’ punk community is an abject betrayal of some of the movement’s central tenets (see chapter one above): independence from the mainstream, avoidance of hierarchy and, within this community, no stars, no heroes, *no leaders*. But wait: *no leaders*? Who can say that? *Who* can say it without, in the communication process, enacting some leadership?

¹³ Sinker, Mark, ‘Concrete, So as to Self-destruct: The Etiquette of Punk, its Habits, Rules, Values and Dilemmas’ in Sabin, *Punk*, pp.120-139: 126.

Can communication fail to lead? Can it avoid someone leading some other one somewhere? It is difficult to see how this could occur. What would be communicated if no leading occurred? To speak, to some extent, is to be a leader, perhaps. If this is accepted, however, it does not necessarily follow that all speech is unjust. Is it not possible, after all, for us to feel that a communicational balance of forces is in play, that a speech act is 'right' in some moment? If it were possible for us to feel that an other saying 'I do not want to dominate you' could thereby offer a glimpse of justice in this speech act, for example, perhaps there would be a chance for something like Sinker's conception of punk community appearing in that moment.¹⁴ What are the implications, however, of his absolute refutation of cadres, vanguard leaders and *conscious* community? Can Sinker's self-deconstructing punk community protect itself against, for example, the large-scale apparatus of society's more ostensible leadership, if required to do so? If not, is punk's anarchist tendency self-defeating, as Trotskyite and Leninist Marxists will often insist is in the nature of the anarchist strategy?

These crucial questions must be postponed for the time being. In this first section, I wish only to explore the issues of novelty, originality and self-presentation, leaving

¹⁴ The fact that this other's promise may be duplicitous renders the justice of the speech act, if there can be such a thing, no more than a chance or *aporetic* possibility, granted. It does not necessarily follow that justice is simply impossible, however; the hearer of a speech act is presented with the need for a decision as to the sincerity of the speaker (hence the ascription of justice as an aporetic possibility) and perhaps then they could feel the speech act to be just. The Derridean idea of a possible justice from aporia will be central to the present chapter.

these larger and ‘smaller’ (micro-social, we might prefer to say) political questions for discussion in the following two sections.

Breaking the Windows and Leaping to Freedom

According to Nicholas Abercrombie, Scott Lash and Brian Longhurst, punk is ‘post-modern’.¹⁵ In the *Modernity and Identity* anthology from which this claim derives, however, Marshall Berman compares punk bands to the likes of Antonin Artaud and Jackson Pollock, stating that ‘they are modernists whether they know it or not’.¹⁶

Whether punk’s urge ‘to break the windows and leap to freedom’ is post-modern or simply modernist would seem to be moot, then.¹⁷ In any case, despite numerous claims to punk having something in common with folk music as noted in chapter one, it is clear that the punk tradition has included at least something of a modernistic or avant-gardist tendency.¹⁸

Before proceeding further, an important distinction needs to be made (already hinted at above). Though etymologically related, the term ‘avant-garde’ (and related terms such as avant-gardist, avant-gardism, and so on) will be taken in this chapter to

¹⁵ Nicholas Abercrombie, Scott Lash and Briant Longhurst, ‘Popular Representation: Recasting Realism’ in Lash, Scott, Friedman, Jonathan, *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp.115-140: 119 and 136.

¹⁶ Berman, Marshall, ‘Why Modernism Still Matters’, in Lash and Friedman, *Modernity*, pp.33-58: 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.46.

¹⁸ Think of ‘Johnny Rotten’ (John Lydon)’s first words in ‘Anarchy in the UK’, for example: ‘Right! NOW!’, he exclaims, insisting on immediate attention in a manner which thereby has definite similarities to much modernist and avant-garde art.

connote a rather different tendency from that of the 'vanguard' (and vanguardist, etcetera). The latter term is commonly understood in much of contemporary discourse to connote political militancy in general and Marxist-Leninist strategy in particular. This connotation will be maintained here. The former term, by contrast, will be taken in this chapter to refer to an artistic ambition towards new-ness, self-presence and absolute originality. It is this ambition, commonly found in punk and many strands of post-punk, which will concern us in the first instance.

In terms of this desire for absolute renewal through total disconnection from standard practices, it is well-known that avant-garde art's most heroic period can be identified in the years around World War I. In addition to the riotous response to Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (allegedly echoed by Bob Dylan's performance at Newport in 1965, see chapter one above), there were of course many other significant radicalisations of the principles of rhythm, harmony and structure from the Second Viennese School and elsewhere during those critical years. James Joyce's extraordinary prose style in *Ulysses* and other works from around the WWI period, meanwhile, formed a particularly startling break with literary tradition but one which certainly was grounded in a broad avant-gardism across Europe and beyond. The visual arts, perhaps most of all, broke firmly with tradition when they finally severed what had hitherto been a *sine qua non*: the principle of representation of 'reality' (previously accepted as objective). Consider, in this context, the following anecdotal explanation by Kandinsky of a critical moment in his movement towards 'abstraction':

I was returning from my sketching, deep in thought, when, on opening the studio door, I was suddenly confronted with a picture of indescribable incandescent loveliness. Bewildered, I stopped, staring at it. The painting lacked all subject, depicted no recognisable object and was entirely composed of bright patches of colour. Finally I approached closer, and only then recognised it for what it really was – my own painting, standing on its side on the easel...¹⁹

This confrontation was critical, of course, because through it Kandinsky was emboldened to make the crucial step into – himself? The question must hang precisely because – as is well known – it *cannot be answered* (on the grounds that the self, if such a thing can be talked of, cannot ask and answer questions of itself – not, that is, if the self of which we would speak has *unity*). Who saw the painting? Kandinsky, naturally. And the painting’s author? The same, it seems. Yet for obvious reasons, the last answer is unsatisfying precisely as a consequence of the aleatoric conditions of the painting’s apprehension by its alleged author. ‘What it really was... my *own* painting’ – or was it? The question rests on the issue of who *exactly* this ‘Kandinsky’ is; who, exactly, *this* or *that* Kandinsky might be at, if we can be precise about it, this or that moment.

The issue, to use a Derridean term to which we will return shortly, is of *différance*, therefore. If the Kandinsky who was ‘confronted with a picture of indescribable incandescent loveliness’ was the *same* Kandinsky who, perhaps earlier that day, had painted this picture (*really* this picture? *this* ‘indescribable incandescent’ picture?) then how can there be said to be any significance to the incident? By his own account,

¹⁹ Quoted in Bowness, Alan, *Modern European Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972), p.130.

the event influenced the artist's conception of what his art could be. The painting (noun) influenced painting (verb), and not just the work of this 'singular' artist: we know Kandinsky was a vitally important 'individual' in the development of avant-garde abstract art, and we know it because it is *widely agreed upon*.

The problem with regard to avant-garde novelty should be clear from this brief account, then. The artist's supposedly bold step into the unknown is, through its *presentation* in some synchronic instance, contingent upon conditions which are insolubly multiple. This multiplicity is partly manifested in the wide agreement mentioned a moment ago, where 'unique' artistic achievements are evidenced by communal judgement, but also because what in everyday parlance is labelled 'subjective individuality' is in fact multiple *all the way down*, at least at the discursive level (as is reflected by the fact that 'as you were' is grammatical, and not 'as you was'). The Kandinsky 'returning from my sketching, deep in thought', in other words, is irretrievably different from the Kandinsky who, a moment later, will have seen a 'new' painting and conceived of, it is said, a new mode of (un)representation.²⁰

Rosalind Krauss has written in detail of this tendency in avant-garde discourse to conflate self-presence and originality with novelty: 'The self as origin is the way an absolute distinction can be made between a present experienced *de novo* and a tradition-laden past. The claims of the avant-garde are precisely these claims to

²⁰ The irretrievable difference between the two Kandinsky's is a *sine qua non* of Derridean theory, as we shall see below.

originality.’²¹ It is clear, however, that an avant-gardist ‘self’ which is presented in opposition to ‘tradition’ is (negatively) contingent upon that tradition and, therefore, can hardly be said to operate in the isolation which words such as ‘individuality’ and ‘originality’ would seem to imply. Perhaps with this problem in mind, Krauss states that ‘more than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth’.²²

The drift of Krauss’s argument here - that avant-garde art often wants to achieve a ‘ground zero’ – is valuable, and especially when considered in the context of the power which has been wielded by the actual examples of heroic avant-garde art mentioned above. *Le Sacre du Printemps*, for example, is more famous than *L’Oiseau de Feu* and *Petrushka* almost certainly because it contained more of the ‘shock of the new’. *Ulysses* may not be read more than *The Dubliners* but holds greater renown in terms of the progress of English literature. *Der Blaue Reiter* is lauded for its role in Kandinsky’s movement towards something ‘*décisive pour l’évolution de l’art au XX^e siècle*’ more than as an isolated work of intrinsic value.²³ If ideas of new-ness and originality are stripped from the avant-garde concept, what remains? In practice, the ‘ground zero’ of avant-garde art’s supposed originality has been its principal *raison*

²¹ Krauss, Rosalind E., *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT, 1997), p.157.

²² Ibid: p.157.

²³ Vezin, Annette, Vezin, Luc, *Kandinsky et le Cavalier Bleu* (Paris: Pierre Terrail, 1991), p.9. In other words, *Der Blaue Reiter* is not always considered Kandinsky’s greatest work and, furthermore, this work is never considered to have isolated significance as a ‘ground zero’ piece but rather is always discussed in the context of the work which Kandinsky produced shortly before and after this particular work.

d'être. In many cases, this has been entirely explicit, and perhaps nowhere more strongly than in the famously hysterical rhetoric of the Futurists: 'With our enthusiastic adherence to Futurism, we will: 1) Destroy the cult of the past, the obsession with the ancients... 2) Totally invalidate all kinds of imitation. 3) Elevate all attempts at originality...' ²⁴

So stated Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, Balla and Severini in the first three points of their 1910 *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters*. A year earlier, F.T. Marinetti had made a comparable gesture in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*: 'Museums: cemeteries!... Museums: public dormitories where one lies forever beside hated or unknown beings... Museums: absurd abattoirs... What is there to see in an old picture except the laborious contortions of an artist throwing himself against the barriers that thwart his desire to express his dream completely?' ²⁵ Marinetti's solution, 'We will destroy the museums', makes it easy to see why many Futurists would subsequently sympathise with the rise of Italian Fascism. Seventy years later, the not-yet-famous and distinctly dissonant post-punk group Adam and the Ants would sing a tribute:

Marinetti, Boccioni

Carrà, Balla, Palasechi!

Futurist Manifesto!

War is the world's only hygiene

²⁴ Apollonio, Umbro, *The Documents of twentieth-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos* (New York: Viking Press, 1970), p.26.

²⁵ Apollonio, *Documents*, p.22.

Energy and fearlessness...²⁶

Adam Ant, under his real name Stuart Goddard, had (like many who would go on to take an involvement in 1970s punk) attended art school where, it is fair to assume, he must have learnt of the Futurists. A far from peripheral figure in punk, Goddard had been the bassist in pub rock group Bazooka Joe which was the headline act when the Sex Pistols played their first gig at St. Martin's College of Art in 1975. In a spontaneous gesture itself recalling the rhetoric of the Futurists, Goddard immediately quit his band with the intention of forming his own. (This gesture would be reproduced by many other individuals around the same time, including the vocalist of pub-rockers the 101'ers who rechristened himself Joe Strummer and formed the Clash after witnessing his first Pistols performance, for example.) Adam and the Ants would go on to become the joint biggest 'independent' punk group by 1979, alongside rivals Crass, whose *de facto* role as vanguard leaders of the anarcho-punk movement contrasts strongly (and relevantly to my argument here) with the avant-gardist tendencies of the Ants. Even when they became 'teeny bop' stars around 1980-1, Adam and the Ants retained some connection with the early punk movement, adding guitarist Marco Pirroni who had performed in the one-off original line-up of Siouxsie and the Banshees, alongside Sid Vicious (later to replace Glen Matlock in the Sex Pistols) at the significant 100 Club Punk Festival in September 1976. The Futurist-recalling rhetoric of the early Adam and the Ants records would, as has often been the

²⁶ Adam and the Ants, 'Animals and Men', *Dirk Wears White Sox*, Do It Records, RIDE 3, 1979.

case in punk and post-punk, remain recognisable in the lyrics and elements of their musical approach.²⁷

Close analysis of musical materials from different eras of punk-associated music will be offered in chapters three and four, with the aim of uncovering possible significances in its varying attempts to offer elements of musical innovation and peculiarity (avant-gardism, of a sort, then). At present, we might note simply that a firmly avant-gardist tendency can be ascertained close to the heart of punk's aesthetic paradigm at least in the late 1970s and, I will argue, in the following two decades. What, then, is the philosophical problematic behind this avant-gardist tendency? As Krauss notes, it is a problem of a presumption that an original self can be 'experienced' (and, presumably, produced or presented) through a break with tradition. It can be problematised, in short, on the grounds of multivalence or multiplicity at the base(s) of this self-hood. The same point is made by Kaya Oakes in her work on the 'indie culture' which she closely associates with punk: 'Indie's ambiguity can partially be chalked up to its emphasis on making its participants feel individual and unique. But before any of us were able to be creatively independent, we had to build on the practice of our independent predecessors'.²⁸ The nuances of the dynamic in question can better be apprehended, perhaps, through utilisation of some key terms and theories of Derrida.

²⁷ For example, the lines 'unplug the jukebox and do us all a favour, that music's lost its taste so try another flavour' in their 1981 hit 'Antmusic'. Musically, the song is considerably less unusual, by pop standards, than the earlier Adam and the Ants recordings, yet the African-inspired drumming and Native American-inspired vocal whoops certainly reflect some attempt to create something distinctly new in a pop context (*Kings of the Wild Frontier*, LP, CBS, CBS 4549, 1980).

²⁸ Oakes, *Slanted*, p.11.

Between Novelty and Originality: Supplementarity and the Trace

Without question, one of the key terms from the early Derrida is *trace*. Essentially, the trace is the imprint from prior usage with no absolute origin: a track in the snow, for example, indicates that something has been there yet this ‘appearance’ of prior presence is in fact the sight of actual absence. This conception is crucial because, through the trace, Derrida enables himself to challenge the idea of ‘the “subject” of writing [as] some sovereign solitude of the author’ yet retains ‘a *system* of relations between strata’.²⁹ The latter is provided by Derrida’s concept of *supplementarity*, whereby each supplement adds to but simultaneously cannot entirely separate from the trace. With this combination of trace and supplement, Derrida places ‘the sign under erasure [*sous rature*] – both *conserving* and *effacing* the sign’.³⁰

To attempt further clarification, consider the following knot: folksinger Ramblin’ Jack Elliott (not to be confused with the English singer of the same name from Birtley’s Elliott family), sometime travelling partner of Woody Guthrie and frequent singer of the latter’s songs, has been claimed to have ‘accomplished... a refinement of Guthrie’s singing and playing style, an amalgamation of Woody’s genius and his own talents into a compound better than either alone’.³¹ Famously, Elliott ‘began to live the life of Woody, imitating not only his manner of speaking, his singing, his guitar

²⁹ Quoted in Burke, Sean, *Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp.184-5.

³⁰ Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1976), p.lviii, emphasis retained.

³¹ Sleeve-notes to Jack Elliott, *Talking Woody Guthrie*, Topic, 12 T 92, c.1963.

playing, but the highly personal mannerisms as well', to the extent that the older man joked 'Jack Elliott sounds more like me than I do!'³² Guthrie's anterior voice (the non-present trace picked up and supplemented by Elliott), however, is described on the jacket of his autobiographical novel *Bound For Glory* as 'the voice of Kerouac, Corso, Dylan and Brautigan'.³³ A literary specialist, meanwhile, could doubtless tell us something of from whence the latter four writers' 'voices' were largely derived.

Clearly, here, each voice adds supplement to anterior traces; according to Derrida, this process has no point of origin and no conclusion (Kerouac, Corso, Dylan and Brautigan have their antecedents, who also have their own antecedents, and so on indefinitely; meanwhile Kerouac, Corso, Dylan and Brautigan influence all further cultural work even if that influence is indirect, unobvious and occurs in a different historico-cultural field – as in the case of a possible listener to Ramblin' Jack Elliot who is unfamiliar with Kerouac *et al*). Rodolphe Gasché has quoted affirmatively Derrida's assertion that with the trace comes 'the disappearance of origin'.³⁴ This disappearance is crucial to the key concept of *deconstruction*. Also crucial, for those who would grapple with the latter term, is the Derridean concept of *différance*.

According to Christopher Johnson,

This neologism is derived from the French verb '*différer*', which means to defer, to adjourn, to put off. Derrida's substantivization of the verb could be translated

³² Ibid.

³³ Guthrie, Woody, *Bound For Glory* (London: Picador, 1969).

³⁴ Gasché, Rodolphe, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986), p.190.

as something like ‘deferment’ in English, but this loses a whole complex of associations peculiar to the original French.³⁵

Even so, English readers will do well to bear in mind this crucial *temporal* connotation if they wish to understand anything of what Derrida would refer to with the term *différance*. With the concept of the trace, Derrida displaces concepts of spatial and temporal presence by proposing, essentially, the trace as an infinite non-presence:

Without a retention in the minimal unit of temporal experience, without a *trace* retaining the other as *other in the same*, no difference would do its work and *no meaning would appear*. It is not the question of a constituted difference here, but rather, *before* all determination of the content, of the *pure* movement which produces difference. *The (pure) trace is différance*.³⁶

The trace, then, is synonymous with *différance*, at least in its ‘pure’ form (or lack thereof; we should not forget, that is, that the trace is a non-presence and, according to Derrida, ‘it does not exist’ as a difference in any straight-forward sense; it consists only of a spatial/temporal *différance*, an infinite deferral, permanently without ‘form’ therefore; the pure trace never arrives, in other words³⁷). Gasché has noted this connection between Derridean terms, describing it as an ‘infrastructural chain’.³⁸

³⁵ Johnson, *Derrida*, p.42.

³⁶ Derrida quoted in Johnson, *Derrida*, p.43, some emphasis added, final emphasis upon the equivalence of the (pure) trace and *différance* retained from the original.

³⁷ *Ibid*: p.43, emphasis retained.

³⁸ Gasché, *The Tain*, p.185.

Gasché is at pains to make clear that this is a ‘non-Marxist notion of infrastructure’.³⁹ Instead, ‘infrastructures... are the outcome of deconstruction’.⁴⁰ Deconstruction constitutes Derrida’s ‘attempt to shake totality, to make it tremble in its entirety’.⁴¹ This deconstruction ‘does not preclude all systematicity’, nevertheless; on the contrary, its infrastructures are ‘not without structure or systematicity’.⁴²

It would therefore seem that, for Gasché at least, Derrida’s work is certainly not a relativist destruction of all foundations. On the contrary, ‘deconstruction reaches out for “ultimate foundations”’ but the last concept ‘will have to be put in quotation marks’ (placed under erasure, in Derridean terms, then).⁴³ This seems to be because the ultimate foundation of deconstruction, despite its problematisation of any concept of ‘originary difference’, is the positing of

an infrastructure that accounts for the emergence of origin as an aftereffect [sic].

It accounts for the possibility that such a reconstituted and reconstructed origin can itself be supplemented by additions, for the possibility that such additions can engender so-called origins, and for the possibility that the operation of supplementation and the function of vicarious substitution are unlimited.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid: p.147.

⁴⁰ Ibid: p.165.

⁴¹ Ibid: p.179.

⁴² Ibid: p.180.

⁴³ Ibid: p.121.

⁴⁴ Ibid: pp.209-10.

The foundation of deconstruction, then, is to make ‘totality’ shake and tremble by positing no foundation to the concept of the origin. This contradiction (the ultimate foundation of deconstruction is its very *lack* of ultimate foundations) is classically Derridean. Derrida’s fondness for contradictions is a crucial factor behind his thinking and will be discussed at greater length later in the present chapter. For the time being, with regard to the question of avant-gardism and originality, we should simply note that Derrida does not in fact deny that ‘iteration alters [and, consequent to this alteration], something new takes place’.⁴⁵

As regards this ‘something new’, Derrida is quite explicit as to its necessary arrival in all events. For example, in a 1994 discussion with Maurizio Ferraris on the issue of ‘opening to the other’, he states that

In fact... one is faced with something [a]new [*de nouveau*]; I am always faced with something [a]new. I know that philosophically it is naïve to believe it possible to be naïve, yet at the same time it is absolutely new each time... No repetition will ever exhaust the novelty of what comes. Even if one were able to imagine the contents of experience wholly repeated – always the same thing, the same person, the same landscape, the same place and the same text returning – the fact that the present is new would be enough to change everything.⁴⁶

As with Noam Chomsky’s theory of transformational and generative grammar, in which the production of new sentences was argued to be the normal process of

⁴⁵ Ibid: p.215.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *A Taste*, pp.69-70, square brackets retained from original.

linguistic agency, Derrida's trajectory in this passage would seem to place the possibility for transformation in the hands of everyone (anyone can do it).⁴⁷ It is worth comparing this with the way that Peter Starr has specifically challenged the idea of a need for novelty in revolutionary action in his book *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68*. His desire to problematise the conflation of revolution and new-ness, which he traces back to the 1789 French Revolution, is highlighted from his very first paragraph:

Prior to 1789, the word 'revolution' signified a great sea change in political affairs, without significant prejudice as to its 'progressive' or 'regressive' nature. Indeed the origins of the concept of revolution in the field of celestial movement long sustained a relative emphasis on particularly cyclical or recurrent forms of political mutation, forms that effected a return to the past fully as much as a break from that past. In seventeenth century England, for example, the restoration of monarchy with the overthrow of the Rump Parliament in 1660 could lay as great a claim to the status of revolution as the expulsion of the Stuarts in 1688.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Chomsky, Noam, *Syntactic Structures* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002), first published 1957.

Derrida showed strong sympathies with Chomsky in some of his late work, as noted by Alex Callinicos, 'Jacques Derrida and the New International' in Glendinning, Simon, Eaglestone, Robert, *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp.80-9: 85. His sympathy for Chomsky is particularly clear in a discussion with Elisabeth Roudinescu, *For What*, pp.132-3, an emotion which the latter markedly lacks with regard to the Jewish American liberalist.

⁴⁸ Starr, Peter, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68* (California: Stanford, 1995), p.1.

For Starr, the latter-day connotation of the word revolution involves a ‘suppression of [the] older sense of revolution as cyclical repetition’.⁴⁹ French theory after May ’68, he suggests, has intensified this suppression by dint of its fear of a ‘logic of specular doubling’ in which, to quote Marx supposedly quoting Hegel, ‘all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He [Hegel] forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce’.⁵⁰ If Starr’s complaint is fair enough with regard to some of Derrida’s continental colleagues, it would seem odd to apply it to the Frenchman who has insisted that ‘the event is... what comes, what happens’.⁵¹

Derrida goes on to clarify that

the coming of the one who comes is to be greeted as a coming back – and what is true for the *arrivant* [the one who comes] is equally true for the event. This does not mean to say that the coming is not new. It is new. The coming is absolutely new. But the novelty of this coming implicates in and of itself the *coming back*.⁵²

It should be clear, then, that for Derrida ‘iterability’ is never just repetition. For this reason if no other, the logic of specular doubling (as critiqued by Starr) would not

⁴⁹ Ibid: p.2.

⁵⁰ ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, *Surveys From Exile* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), pp.143-249: 146. It was Engels who had put these words into Hegel’s mouth, it seems, in a letter to Marx: according to David Fernbach, ‘It is doubtful whether Hegel ever wrote these words’ (Ibid: p.146, footnote).

⁵¹ Derrida, Jacques, ‘A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event’ in Mitchell, W.J.T., Davidson, Arnold I., *The Late Derrida* (London: University of Chicago, 2007), pp.223-243: 225.

⁵² Ibid: p.235.

necessarily make cyclic repetition of revolutionary strategies impotent, nor could the repetition be a case of blank parody (*à la* Jameson⁵³). We can clearly see, therefore, that Derrida's conception of 'the event' differs markedly from the ideas of certain other French theorists whose thought it will be better not to explore here: for Derrida, the event is 'what happens', and this event will necessarily have some novelty.⁵⁴

For the purpose of the discussion which follows, there will be a need to distinguish between this conception of a necessary novelty (of what comes) and the feeling of a strongly apparent novelty (which, if it *can* appear, must have the potential *not* to appear, by contrast). The latter appearance could arrive via a painting placed sideways on the easel, or a jarring interval in the opening phrase of a symphony, or a safety pin piercing the nose of a spike-haired punk. For discursive purposes, we will call this appearance of ostentatious new-ness the *new-sense*. Strictly, it may be no more or less 'new' than, say, a morning routine in which toast pops out of a toaster, or in which a pupil observes the grey-haired school master's choice of suit: these are new, in Derridean terms, whether or not the suit has been worn a thousand times, whether or not the toaster has been used successfully a thousand times before. This is the case, according to Derrida, because 'no repetition will exhaust the novelty of what comes'.

⁵³ Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke, 1991).

⁵⁴ The best known theorist of the event is Alain Badiou, especially his *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005). Badiou's conception of 'event' is, to put things over crudely, avant-gardist: roughly speaking, he defines the event as a locus of what is defined in the following paragraph as 'new-sense', that is. His insistence upon the event as a *contingent* arrival (an arrival, in other words, which is dependent on certain conditions which he specifies at great length) is quite at odds with Derrida's conception of the arrival of the event as *necessary* (as the quotations above indicate).

The safety pin through the nose, however, *also* offers (or has offered; it might be said that it no longer feels new today, that is) a new-sense in its provision of a certain shock of novelty which anyone might feel.

Perhaps anyone can feel it, this new-sense, then, in some particular moment. Yet if it *is* the case that a point can arrive when the (ex-)new-sense fails to feel new (as would seem obviously to be the case; the Charleston, for example, is considered by most people today as being a somewhat quaint dance rather than being modern or ‘racy’, it would seem fair to presume), what happens then? What are the political implications, in other words, for an empowerment from novelty (as discussed by McKay above) if this novelty is only capable of appearing in a certain initial period in which the ‘new’ thing is sensed? The safety pin, the ‘abstract’ painting or the jarring interval may have encouraged a certain connection or ‘recognition’ between individuals at some point; perhaps, indeed, such a recognition was empowering for these individuals in that instance. Once the elements which encouraged the new-sense become familiar and contextualised, however, does it follow that the now-no-longer-new thing becomes somewhat consonant with a certain dominant order? Perhaps so, for if some empowerment was kindled with a momentary recognition of the new-sense, it would seem to follow that this empowerment would correlatively be dissolved with the arrival of this ‘consonance’; dissolved or, arguably, ceded to the dominant power with which the now-consonant elements harmonise in a manner which can only *disempower* individuals. Perhaps, however, the new-sense might be said to have led to a certain political power in the sense that it has forced a recognition in the dominant order; after all, Marx’s theories were no longer new in any obvious sense by 1917, yet

the Russian Revolution would seem to have brought a certain empowerment to a large population in the same year.

Clearly these questions demand an answer (they are, in other words, *aporetic*, to foreshadow a term to which we shall return shortly). How radical is the new? The question is somewhat Deleuzian.⁵⁵ According to James Williams, ‘Deleuze asks us to pay attention to new events and to new developments insofar as they connect to eternal problems in new ways’.⁵⁶ For Todd May, ‘it is after the events of May 1968 in France that politics moves towards the forefront of [Deleuze’s] thought’ specifically as part of a wider attempt by French intellectuals to ‘theorise progressive politics outside the Marxist tradition’.⁵⁷ If May and Williams are correct, this attempt would seem to imply a perceived need for a firmly *post-Marxist* radical novelty in politics. For Derrida, that said, an inheritance from Marx remains worth talking about, as we shall see; and a demand for novelty, we can note, is far less apparent in his writing than in that of Gilles Deleuze.

From a Marxist point of view, it should be mentioned, the struggle of the proletariat remained something of a ‘dissonance’ (to extend the metaphor from the last paragraph

⁵⁵ James Williams uses this question in order to attempt to distinguish between Gilles Deleuze and Gaston Bachelard’s philosophies, *Encounters and Influences: The Transversal Thought of Gilles Deleuze* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2005), pp.74-5.

⁵⁶ Ibid: p.141. Williams goes on to suggest that, for Deleuze, ‘we should always be testing boundaries [and] principles [in order to] create new events – to become an event for other individuals’; this alone would suggest that Deleuze would make a useful cross-reference for the theoretical trajectories I am developing here, although there is not the space to do so in the present context.

⁵⁷ May, Todd, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.117.

but one) in the political macro-sphere of 1917 regardless of any apparently radical novelty (or lack thereof) in the Marxist approach. From a strict Marxist perspective, furthermore, the struggle for communism can only ever be ‘dissonant’ whilst capitalism prevails: only with the complete abolition of state capitalism and the universal arrival of communism could Marxism become ‘consonant’. Clearly, then, there is room for argument here, and doubtless a need to give more detail of the Marxist approach and other strategies/strategists of the Left; anarchism, being the most obvious rival to Marxism (as well as being the ‘ideology’ – if anarchism can be so described, which is debatable at least – most commonly advocated by punks).

Can a new-sense provide the crucial conditions for Mark Sinker’s (un)desired community without leaders? Can it allow a certain justice within a hail to some other anyone?⁵⁸ It seems reasonable, at least, to guess that what I am calling the new-sense allows punk’s empowerment of self (McKay) precisely for this reason: it allows a feeling of originality or new-ness within some local relationship, some form of recognition of the other in some moment out of context.⁵⁹ However, without

⁵⁸ My thinking here is heavily influenced by Althusser’s work on subjectivity and the ‘interpellative’ hail, in Althusser, Louis, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: NLB, 1971); clearly, however, I am putting his theory to somewhat different work since Althusser was very much an orthodox Marxist.

⁵⁹ It should be acknowledged that McKay uses the term ‘new-sense’ within a chapter heading in his *Senseless Acts of Beauty*. He does not explicitly use the term to articulate the elements of newness and of self-empowerment which are somewhat sublimated within his writings, however; indeed he reveals that the term was given to him by an informant from ‘eco-warrior’ group Spiral Tribe, p.123. I did not consciously take the term from McKay’s book, it is worth adding, though I am using it in a way which I believe is very much in keeping with what I take to be McKay’s (sublime) trajectory.

encouraging a consistent strategy – a tradition, then – for militant empowerment of the subaltern class (the proletariat), what purpose does this empowerment have?

We might recall, here, that to talk of a perfectly novel moment of self-empowerment (as in extreme forms of anarchism) is contradistinctive to the theories discussed above: pure originality in an absolute avant-garde cannot be spoken of. This is not only because the true individual must remain silent, however, though it should be obvious that to communicate is certainly to attempt to travel away from the strictest individuality. It is also (and more importantly, for the purpose of the present chapter) because to presume it possible to simply theorise objectively about ‘the autonomy of the *cogito*, of the subject, of thought’ would be to abandon the post-Cartesian contribution of Derrida in particular and twentieth century philosophy in general.⁶⁰ As Gasché explains on behalf of Derrida, ‘the arche-trace must be understood as the fold of an irreducible “bending-back”, as a minimal (self-) difference within (self-)identity, which secures selfhood and self-presence through the detour of oneself (as Other) to oneself’.⁶¹ There is not space in this thesis to rehearse Gasché’s lengthy exposition of the early Derrida’s theories, drawing as it does on Russell, Whitehead, Wittgenstein and various other philosophers.⁶² In short, we can say that the picture he draws of

⁶⁰ Gasché, *The Tain*, pp.13-4.

⁶¹ Ibid: p.192.

⁶² Ibid: p.68 for Gasché’s references to Russell et al in his explication of Derrida’s differences from Hegel. As to the reference above to the ‘early Derrida’, Mitchell has suggested that a division in to early, middle and late periods of Derrida’s work will become ‘canonical’, *The Late*, p.4.

Derrida's 'unconditional heterology' of the 'detour of oneself (as Other)' would support Krauss's riposte to the concept of pure avant-garde originality.⁶³

If punk has an anarchistic and rather avant-gardist tendency, then, the tendency must be to some extent problematic from a Derridean point of view. As Gasché makes clear, 'deconstruction is eminently plural': from a deconstructive perspective, therefore, the idea of a singular avant-gardist genius/originality must certainly be problematised, as must the ultra-anarchistic concept of self-as-vanguard.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, the new-sense(s) of punk, for more than three decades, has (have) led successive generations of the young and not-so-young to participate in what is often referred to as 'the' punk community. The traditions of punk have shown a commitment to anarchistic values and practices, furthermore, just at the time that Marxism and socialism appear to have gone into an international decline. It must be worth considering, that given, not only such contemporary appearances but also the historical antagonisms between Marxism and anarchism which came to prominence, as is well known, in the mid-nineteenth century.

⁶³ Ibid: pp.102-3. Gasché's preparatory comments regarding the 'unconditional heterology' of Derrida's work invoke an 'Otherness not exclusively elicited in terms of negation'. Gasché's great wish is to demonstrate that 'Derrida's Other – let us call it the *general Other* – is an alterity that has nothing of an essence or truth'. It is fair to say, therefore, that Gasché sometimes tends towards a somewhat pessimistic reading of Derrida in which the latter 'brings philosophy to a certain close', p.251.

Comparison of optimistic and pessimistic readings of Derrida will be covered later in the chapter. It is not the place of the present study to judge between these assessments, of course. It is perhaps worth noting, nevertheless, that Gasché's canonical text, having been published in 1987, clearly could not have engaged with the later texts from Derrida which are normally considered to be the more optimistic parts of his output.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.7.

Section Summary

There are strong grounds for describing punk as a modernist movement with a somewhat avant-gardist tendency. This is reflected in discourses around the movement(s) which have prioritised the importance of new-ness/novelty. Theories from Derrida provide a valuable riposte to this prioritisation by suggesting that ‘origins’ are always already a continuation, on the one hand, and that what happens has to be new on some level simply because no iteration can provide an exact repetition of some anterior event, on the other hand. Nevertheless, it is possible for a new-ness to be felt or not felt, we can add. For discursive purposes, this felt new-ness can be described as a new-sense. The new-sense, and its role in the political formation/sustenance of communities, provides a crucial element in the question as to the politics of empowerment in the traditions of punk, therefore: a question as to the most effective strategies of resistance.

ii. Marxism, Anarchism and the Issue of Universality

According to Bede Jarrett, ‘howsoever we define it, socialism is a modern thing, and dependent almost entirely on modern conditions’.⁶⁵ In the middle ages, Jarrett suggests, ‘we must not expect to find any fully-pledged [sic] socialism’.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, in his text *Medieval Socialism*, he suggests that in the pre-modern period we can ‘notice theories which are socialistic rather than socialist’.⁶⁷ There is no reason to dispute Jarrett’s argument, but it will be useful nevertheless, in the present context, to add that socialism – the ‘modern thing’ – did not appear *ex nihilo* in the mid-nineteenth century. On the contrary, socialism developed as a modern doctrine partly in gradual response to historical conditions (principally industrial ‘progress’, doubtless) but also through the thoughts and writings of several serious individuals.

It is not the task of this thesis, that said, to offer an exhaustive history of socialism, Marxism, anarchism, anarchist socialism, anarcho-syndicalism and so on and so forth, nor of the individuals who have thought and written about social alternatives to what, today, we call capitalism. Nevertheless, in order to situate the political aspirations and attitudes of a late twentieth century movement such as punk, particularly bearing in mind the movement’s often explicit commitment to anarchism and anarchistic ideas, it will be helpful to give some historical picture of the developments of Left thinking in the modern, post-Enlightenment period.

⁶⁵ Jarrett, Bede, *Medieval Socialism* (London: Jack, 1913).

⁶⁶ Ibid: p.16.

⁶⁷ Ibid: p.16.

A natural place to start with this is the work of William Godwin in the late eighteenth century. Though Godwin did not call himself an anarchist, associating the term ‘anarchy’ with the worst elements of the then-recent French revolution, he was ‘one of the great libertarian thinkers’ who anticipated many of the anarchist ideas which would come to the fore in the ensuing century, according to George Woodcock.⁶⁸ These ideas were collected in his 1793 magnum opus *Political Justice*. According to Woodcock, this work also had some influence upon the development of socialism and even Marxism:

William Thompson, the early socialist economist, developed his ideas on property largely from Book VIII of *Political Justice*, and it may have been through Thompson, who certainly influenced the economic theories of Karl Marx, that the frail anarchistic *phantom* known as the ‘withering away of the state’ came to *haunt* the imagination of that most authoritarian of socialists.⁶⁹

I have emphasised two words here, ‘phantom’ and ‘haunt’, in order to draw the reader’s attention to Woodcock’s implication of what Derrida would probably call a *spectral* influence from Godwin upon socialism in general and upon Thompson (and thus also Marx, perhaps indirectly) in particular. Let us defer, for the time being, further discussion of this idea of a certain inheritance of a certain spirit, coined by Derrida (some decades after Woodcock wrote this, we can note) as the process of

⁶⁸ Woodcock, George, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1962), p.56.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*: p.85, emphasis added.

‘hauntology’.⁷⁰ It should suffice, at this point, to say that Godwin influenced both socialist and anarchist thinkers, if Woodcock is correct.

Another anarchistic influence upon the early development of socialist thinking was Pierre Joseph Proudhon. Born in France in 1809, Proudhon was a ‘self-proclaimed socialist’ and self-educated proletarian who ‘starved in garrets to buy books’ and, during the 1848 revolutions across Europe, ‘emerged as the head of a growing movement’.⁷¹ Marx, nearly a decade younger, had Proudhon ‘amongst his political mentors in the mid-forties’ and ‘always retained a certain respect’ for the older man, according to Martin Nicolaus.⁷² Nevertheless, Marx would ultimately argue against Proudhon and his followers (the Proudhonists) on grounds of the anarchistic follies of which Marx complained in his well-known 1847 critique *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Certainly Proudhon was, above all, an anarchist, as demonstrated in his 1840 answer to the titular question of his book *What is Property?*: theft, Proudhon declared,

⁷⁰ Derrida’s concept of hauntology is, briefly, what comes before ontology: ‘Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration’, *Spectres*, p.202. Marx, according to Derrida, wants to perform such an exorcism by conjuring exchange-value away from use-value in an ontological moment which would come with a universal communist transformation. The hauntological fact that ‘Everything begins before it begins’, however, seems to make Derrida sceptical as to whether such a moment is possible, *ibid*. In a sense, then, hauntology is Derrida’s conceptual insistence that there is no originary sensuousness (‘use-value’, that is, Derrida seems to say), no ontology un-haunted by prior visitations of spirit: ontology is the (always already failed) attempt to conjure away the hauntological spectre.

⁷¹ Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* translated by Martin Nicolaus (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), pp.10-1 for Nicolaus’s prefatory comments about Proudhon and his relationship with/influence upon Marx.

⁷² *Ibid*: pp.10-1.

indirectly coining one of anarchism's most enduring maxims.⁷³ That said, by the late 1850s 'Proudhon was undoubtedly the leading spokesman of socialism in all France, if not the world', according to Nicolaus.⁷⁴

At least up to the period in which Marx produced his canonical theories of socialist communism, then, there is evidence to suggest that anarchism and socialism were not entirely opposed nor divided. It will be useful, therefore, to give some picture of Marx's influence upon the Left since, it is fair to say, his influence still haunts us today. By necessity, this will be done as briefly as possible.

Born in the Rhineland to a relatively wealthy, assimilated German Jewish family in 1818, Marx moves to France in 1843 where he associates, amongst others, with the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin.⁷⁵ Expelled from France in 1845, then Belgium in 1848 and finally Germany in 1849, he settles in London where he stays for the remainder of his life, struggling constantly with hardship and only able to survive thanks to financial support from his friend, comrade and co-author Friedrich Engels. In his later years, Marx takes a leading role in the International Workingmen's Association (also known, latterly, as the First International). Within the International, great hostility breaks out between Marxist and anarchist factions. It is generally agreed that this hostility is the major cause of the International's collapse in the 1870s, within Europe at least. Marx dies in spring 1883, leaving a firm promise that

⁷³ Proudhon seems not to have actually written 'property is theft' as such in his text, yet *What is Property?* was nevertheless the source of the maxim, without question.

⁷⁴ Ibid: p.11.

⁷⁵ Reiss, *Marx*, p.3.

global revolution is imminent, replete with numerous specific prescriptions as to what would allow this revolution to come forth and how it should be characterised. Perhaps most important amongst these prescriptions is Marx's insistence that the agency of the proletariat, the soon-to-be-universal subject, must be the pre-condition for the absolute transformation entailed by communist revolution.

Marx's political philosophy grew from the influence of Hegel, whose ideas were dominant enough in the early 1840s for a group including Marx, Bruno Bauer and Max Stirner to have become known as the Young Hegelians. The new thing about these youthful re-readers was their inclusion of post-Hegelian ideas such as Feuerbach's humanist critique of Hegelian theory. Marx took a particular interest in Feuerbach, as is reflected in his 1845-penned eleven-point *Theses on Feuerbach* which counterpose the subjective agency of 'sensuous human activity' against 'all hitherto existing materialism'.⁷⁶ He includes the ideas of Feuerbach within the latter grouping (despite his general admiration for the Feuerbach's ideas) on the grounds that Feuerbach's 'thing', his 'reality', is 'conceived only in the form of the *object of contemplation*'. Marxist materialism is founded, by contrast, on the idea that matter is sensuously grasped through social relations, not through the contemplation of individual subjects nor through any pure teleological objectivity, as noted in the introduction above.

Having formulated these theses, Marx worked with Engels through 1845-6 on a text which would eventually be published as *The German Ideology*. In this text, we can

⁷⁶ Marx, Karl, Engels, Frederick, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), supplementary pages.

see the crucial move away from the anarchist conception of individuality and instead towards what Marx and Engels would call ‘class consciousness’:

In all expropriations up to now, a mass of individuals remained subservient to a single instrument of production; in the appropriation by the proletarians, a mass of instruments of production must be made subject to each individual, and property to all. Modern universal intercourse can be controlled by individuals, therefore, only when controlled by all.⁷⁷

It is this conclusion which leads Marx to the determination not only that communism is necessary for the emancipation of the proletarian class from its horrendous exploitation at the hands of a bourgeois, capitalist class, but also that class consciousness amongst the proletariat is the necessary pre-condition for this emancipation. The class consciousness in question would only be a *stage* within movement towards emancipation, however: according to Marx, a brief interregnum (of sorts) in which the state would consist of a ‘revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat’ would be quickly followed by the abolition of the state and all class structures. In this (end of history) instance, the proletariat would become the universal class and the true and permanent emancipation of the individual would be ensured.

It would be a mistake, in other words, to think that Marxism has no interest in individuality. Like the anarchist, Marx calls for ‘an all-round development of individuals’; unlike the anarchist, however, Marx insists that ‘the task of replacing the domination of circumstances and of chance over individuals [with] the domination of

⁷⁷ Marx and Engels, *The German*, p.93.

individuals over chance and circumstances' will require a proletarian-led state, in the interim at least.⁷⁸ This can never happen, furthermore, in only one country. On the contrary, 'Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of the dominant peoples "all at once" and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with communism'.⁷⁹

This coupled insistence upon universal transformation plus the temporary dictatorship of the proletariat was perhaps the greatest cause of the split between the nineteenth century anarchist viewpoint and Marx's contrary ideas. For the Marxists, anarchists are reformists and thus doomed to failure, it is fair to summarise: for the anarchists, Marxists are authoritarians, who will replace the old boss with a new and equally bad boss. A good source of reading on this is Marx's 'Conspectus of Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*' in which the German socialist answers the Russian anarchist's question 'What does it mean, the proletariat organized as ruling class?' by stating

It means that the proletariat, instead of struggling sectionally against the economically privileged class, has attained a sufficient strength and organization to employ general means of coercion in this struggle. It can however only use such economic means as abolish its own character as salariat [sic], hence as

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.117.

⁷⁹ Ibid: p.56.

class. With its *complete victory* its own rule thus also ends, as *its class character has disappeared*.⁸⁰

Peter Starr has argued that this ‘dispute in the Marxist/anarchist polemic’ is a ‘textbook example of what in the wake of Freud has come to be known as kettle logic’ whereby ‘one is just as adamant about translating the other’s language back into one’s own terms as about branding the other with the very flaws that he would project on to you’.⁸¹ Starr’s point is a good one, and emphasises something which I have been hinting at so far in the present section: the Marxist/anarchist dispute, though real and significant in principle, masks a wealth of shared values and ideals. Peter Kropotkin, to take in another example of a nineteenth century anarchist whom one might expect to be resistant to the Marxist tendency, has a clear interest in and enthusiasm for socialism as the site of the ‘mutual aid’ about which Kropotkin’s anarchism would theorise, for example.⁸²

Also suggestive of suppressed similarities between Marxist and anarchist positions is the fact that Engels seems to have been ‘initially enthusiastic’ about Max Stirner’s book *The Ego and Its Own*, writing to Marx to say that ‘any “general cause” striven for by communists must first be an egoistic cause’.⁸³ This is remarkable because, in fact, Stirner’s book would become the object of ridicule in Marx and Engels’s *The*

⁸⁰ Marx, Karl, *The First International and After: Political Writings Volume 3* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974), p.335, emphasis added.

⁸¹ Starr, *Logics*, p.205.

⁸² Kropotkin, *Mutual*, pp.207-213.

⁸³ Newman, Saul, *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), p.126.

German Ideology, wherein Marx's sometime Young Hegelian colleague would be lampooned as 'Saint Max' and 'Sancho'. More than any of the *social* anarchists just mentioned, Stirner theorised a solipsistic *individualist* anarchism in which social responsibility was almost entirely dissolved. (Such is the vulgar understanding of anarchism of course, yet other than Stirner, such self-fixation is in fact rarely adhered to at least in the writings of nineteenth century anarchists.)

Engels and Marx's attack on Stirner is a devastating one, as noted by Derrida in his lengthy discussion of the attack in *Spectres of Marx*. What is particularly interesting in Derrida's account is that, like Starr on the Bakunin/Marx *contretemps*, Derrida suggests that it is precisely the *similarity* between Marx and his supposed foe that evokes Marx's 'rage'.⁸⁴ Derrida shows marked sympathy for Stirner at several points: 'Stirner poses yet another excellent question...'; 'What Stirner and Marx seem to have in common...'; and so on.⁸⁵ Could it be, then, that Derrida has anarchist sympathies despite his famous commitment to 'no future without Marx, without the memory and inheritance of Marx: in any case of a certain Marx, of his genius, of at least one of his spirits'?⁸⁶ Perhaps; for though Derrida has stated that 'Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization, which is to say also *in the tradition* of a certain Marxism, in a certain *spirit of Marxism*', there are reasons to suspect not only that this spirit of Marxism pre-existed Marx himself but also that the 'radicalization' of the tradition in question means that

⁸⁴ Derrida, *Spectres*, p.159.

⁸⁵ Ibid: p.151 for the first quote, p.161 for the second. On the former page, Derrida insists unequivocally that 'we take seriously the originality, audacity and, precisely, the philosophico-political seriousness of Stirner who should also be read without Marx or against him'.

⁸⁶ Ibid: p.13.

Derrida was willing to break with that tradition, at least up to a point.⁸⁷ As we shall see, this break with orthodoxy led to serious reproaches from the more doctrinaire Marxist academics of the late twentieth century. I proceed, therefore, with an enquiry into the extent of Derrida's anarchist tendency, if indeed he had one. This is undertaken in order to situate the theorist I have placed at the heart of my research (Derrida) within a wider picture of the tensions between anarchist and Marxist strategies during the years of the traditions of punk (post-1960s, essentially).

Post-anarchism, Post-Marxism and Post-structuralism in the Post-war Era

This is what Derrida sought in his own way – not one more politics, but another thought *of* politics, or else another thought *than* politics, if politics is inextricably linked to the *archē* in general (or else one must reinterrogate from top to bottom the theme of the *archē* in general – the an-archy of the *archē*, in the sense that Reiner Schürmann spoke of a principle of anarchy.) Above all, one must not cower before the word *politics* as before a sacred cow or a preemptive injunction. One must first ask, *Just what* are we talking about?⁸⁸

Derrida's colleague and friend Jean Luc Nancy places the word 'just' here carefully, but the discussion of the Derridean conception of justice must be postponed until the

⁸⁷ Ibid: p.92. The Marxism that could pre-exist Marx would be something of the 'phantom' which seemed to 'haunt' Marx as referred to by Woodcock above. Derrida's problematisation of all origins and all nomination, combined with his theory of hauntology, means that it can make sense to propose a Marxist spirit *before* Marx at least within the terms of Derridean theory.

⁸⁸ Nancy, Jean Luc, 'Philosophy as Chance' in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, pp.209-222: 217, emphasis retained.

next section of the present chapter. For now we can simply note that Nancy, asked here to speak on behalf of the recently deceased Derrida, seems to link Derrida to ‘a principle of anarchy’. Like Nancy, Vincent B. Leitch has noted an ‘anarchist sensibility’ in the work of Derrida.⁸⁹ Leitch is willing to ‘concur with Derrida’s self-assessment that “I am not an anarchist”’ but suggests that the Frenchman’s suggestively contradictory rejoinder ‘Deconstruction is undoubtedly anarchic’ is ‘more telling’ nevertheless.⁹⁰ Meanwhile Saul Newman has drawn on John Caputo’s suggestion that ‘Derrida’s thinking might be seen as a responsible anarchy, not an irresponsible anarchy’.⁹¹ Habermas, also, has labelled Derrida as an anarchist, according to Michael Thomas.⁹²

Clearly, then, there would seem to be at least something anarchistic about Derrida’s work. For one more example, Elisabeth Roudinesco, in conversation with Derrida, proposes *différance* as ‘improvisational anarchy’.⁹³ Derrida’s response is somewhat revealing, I would suggest. Prefacing his comments with ‘a few abstract remarks on *différance* (with an “a”) and differences (with an “e”)', he states that

What is universalizable about *différance* with regard to differences is that it allows one to think the process of differentiation beyond every kind of limit: whether it is a matter of cultural, national, linguistic, or even human limits.

⁸⁹ Leitch, Vincent B., ‘Late Derrida: The Politics of Sovereignty’ in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, pp.11-29: 28.

⁹⁰ Ibid: p.24.

⁹¹ Newman, *Power*, p.92.

⁹² Thomas, Michael, *The Reception of Derrida* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), p.112.

⁹³ Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What*, p.20.

There is differ^ance (with an “a”) as soon as there is a living trace, a relation of life/death or presence/absence.⁹⁴

For Derrida, this means that ‘there is indeed a universalising potential here’.⁹⁵ I would argue that this responsive reference to the ‘universalising potential’ is very much pointed towards Roudinesco’s implication of a certain anarchy in Derrida’s theory. As he goes on, furthermore, his wish becomes clearer (though characteristically contradictory): to traverse a path between ‘solidarity with those [minorities] who are struggling against this or that discrimination’ yet at the same time to keep in mind ‘this limit to solidarity’ of which ‘communitarianism or state nationalism are the most obvious figures’.⁹⁶ Derrida here is willing to talk of ‘political responsibility’ yet seems to feel obliged to ‘calculate the space, the time and the limit of the alliance’.⁹⁷

There can be little doubt here that Derrida is hinting at the ‘time out of joint’ which his late work suggests as being a necessary element of a ‘promise’ of a certain justice ‘to come’. This promise will be discussed in the following section. In the present section, it is necessary only to note that Derrida, despite the various suggestions of an anarchistic tendency cited above, sits uneasily in both anarchist *and* Marxist camps. On the one hand, he displays something of the ultra-individualism of Stirner. Consider, for example, the following postures from a 1993 interview:

⁹⁴ Ibid: p.21.

⁹⁵ Ibid: p.21.

⁹⁶ Ibid: p.22.

⁹⁷ Ibid: p.22.

The word ‘community’ bothers me... I want the freedom not to answer... I do not identify myself with a linguistic community, a national community, a political party, or with any group or clique whatsoever, with any philosophical or literary school. ‘I am not one of the family’ means: do not consider me ‘one of you’, ‘don’t count me in’...⁹⁸

On the other hand, in an interview of approximately the same period, Derrida remarks that ‘I did not say no to “68”, I took part in the demonstrations, I organised the first general assembly at the Ecole Normale...’.⁹⁹ Despite his resistance to parties, groups and so on, we see here a perhaps surprising willingness to take on a significant role of a conventional ‘organising’ nature. Given Derrida’s apparently bad reputation amongst ‘good’ Marxists, furthermore, it is interesting that this account of his own political agency is accompanied by a statement of Lenin-recalling concern about the ‘apparent spontaneity’ of the May ’68 demonstrations and the attendant lack of ‘any sort of apparatus, party or union’.¹⁰⁰

If Derrida’s awkwardness seems confusing, then, it is perhaps more easily understood through consideration of its historical and cultural context. Todd May, in a significant

⁹⁸ Derrida, *A Taste*, pp.25-7.

⁹⁹ Ibid: p.50.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid: p.50. Derrida goes on, in the next paragraph, to mention Lenin’s *What is to be Done?*, the famous 1902 text in which the particular Leninist-Marxist critique of ‘spontaneity’ was first formulated (*What is to be Done?: Burning Questions of our Movement* (Moscow: Progress, 1949)). See, for example, p.39 for clear argumentation against ‘all oppositional strata’ within the Left, other than the vanguard leadership of the working class (the communist party, that is). For Leninist-Marxists, spontaneous revolution is the pipe dream of the anarchists, and to be denigrated therefore.

contribution to the recent variant of post-structuralism known as *post-anarchism*, has suggested that a resistance to all ‘foundationalism’ in post-war continental philosophy is a consequence of ‘Europe’s recent history of fascism’.¹⁰¹ ‘No European philosopher has been untouched by this history’, May argues. On his view, the philosophical resistance to foundationalism is linked indubitably to a concern over ‘totalitarianism’. May links this totalitarianism not only with fascism but also with the ‘single analysis [of], for example, the Marxist analysis’.¹⁰² He also links the resistance to foundationalism to a ‘lesson that many intellectuals have drawn from’ the events of May ’68 in France. The lesson to which he refers is the fact that the *Parti Française Communiste (PCF)* ‘collaborated with the De Gaulle government to put down the uprising in which some of its own workers participated’.¹⁰³

Some aspects of May’s work are unconvincing, particularly his determination to displace the theoretical need for *aporia of law* (one of Derrida’s pre-conditions for justice to come; see next section) with a thoroughly non-aporetic ‘universality of moral principles’.¹⁰⁴ His critique of the actions of the *PCF*, however, seems well-

¹⁰¹ May, *Reconsidering*, p.5.

¹⁰² Ibid: p.8.

¹⁰³ Ibid: p.8.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid: p.60. In order to propose a need for trans-cultural and universal moral principles, May resorts to describing seemingly obvious examples of immoral behaviour, such as torturing children for fun, p.56. His general association of moral relativism with Derrida, however, seems peculiar since the Derridean desire for justice from ‘*jugement à nouveaux frais*’ (fresh judgement) is Socratic and anarchistic in a way that May’s desire for *imposed* universal morality is not. Derrida is central to May’s *Reconsidering Difference*, yet the ‘Derrida’ he draws is only partially accounted for: for example, Derrida has stated emphatically that ‘it is right [*juste*] that there is law’ and can hardly be purely claimed as a moral relativist, quoted by Callinicos in Glendinning and Eaglestone, *Derrida’s*, p.82.

founded. From the orthodox Marxist point of view, the uprising was to be decried for reasons already discussed above: as May notes, the agitation was not solely nor even principally from the proletarian class and, furthermore, it lacked the vanguard leadership which Leninist-Marxism finds theoretically necessary. For a workers party to actively undermine revolutionary action, however, is difficult to understand even if workers were in the minority. Doubtless some defence of the *PCF* can be made. It can hardly be said, though, that the years since 1968 have seen a rise in the popularity of the Marxist strategy; quite the opposite indeed, with the traditions of punk just forming one example of such antipathy within what is sometimes called the ‘post-Marxist’ era. Even if the *PCF*’s actions were ‘correct’ on some politico-theoretical level, therefore, it would be hard to sustain an argument that the alleged collaboration with the French government was beneficial to the building of any communist ‘critical mass’.¹⁰⁵

This term ‘post-Marxism’ has been principally associated with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who have clearly breached Marxist orthodoxy by stating that ‘the premise of “society” as a sutured and self-defined totality... is not a valid object of discourse’.¹⁰⁶ Post-anarchism is a less commonly utilised and less known term. Aside

¹⁰⁵ A somewhat recuperative strategy, with regard to post-1960s disillusionment with the Marxism, can be observed in Gil Green’s *The New Radicalism: Anarchist or Marxist?* (New York: International, 1971). Green suggests that Marxists must engage with the ‘massive youth revolt... without historic parallel’ of the previous decade in order to engage with this revolting youth and turn it away from the pitfalls he feels are inherent to anarchism. It is fair to say that the May ’68 action of the *PCF* made Green’s ambition less likely to succeed, at the very least in France.

¹⁰⁶ Laclau, Ernesto, Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985), p.111.

from May, another leading proponent is Saul Newman. For Newman, ‘post-anarchism might be seen as an anarchism that no longer relies on the epistemological foundations of Enlightenment humanism, or on essentialist conceptions of subjectivity’.¹⁰⁷ Instead, ‘radical politics today must remain open to a multiplicity of different identities and struggles, particularly those that take place at a more localized level at the interstices of power’.¹⁰⁸

This emphasis upon the ‘localized level’ does not deter Newman from talking of ‘the possibility of new and radical forms of political universality within the anti-foundationalist logic of poststructuralist theory’.¹⁰⁹ This universality would seem to be constituted by ‘a common political struggle’ *without* Marxism’s ‘a priori link’ to the proletariat; instead, ‘because this link is indeterminate and contingent, this opens the political field to other identities’.¹¹⁰ Newman is aware that his hasty proclamation of ‘universality’ *without* class-consciousness will raise the ire of Marxists, one imagines. His utopianism would also be anathema to a great mass of anarchists, it is fair to suggest. After all, it is far from the case that all anarchists are uninterested in the issue of class. To give one ‘classical’ example, Kropotkin consistently pours scorn on the bourgeois class, dreaming of ‘the end of the supremacy of the middle classes’ in his 1897 text *Anarchist Morality*.¹¹¹ To give one contemporary and local example (with a degree of auto-biography coming in to play here), Newcastle’s *Projectile*

¹⁰⁷ Newman, *Power*, p.49.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*: p.49.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*: p.9.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*: p.150.

¹¹¹ Kropotkin, Peter, *Anarchist Morality* (Edinburgh: Black Cat, 2005), p.3.

festivals have attracted anarchists from all over the UK over recent years for an event with a clear and explicit allegiance to the class war.¹¹²

Newman's denial of the importance of the issue of class, then, is at best a partial account of contemporary protest movements. It is difficult to see how 'the' anti-globalization movement, if there is such a thing, could 'challenge... from a universal position' and remain *anti-global*, for one thing. Newman states that

The difference between this movement and the Marxist concept of revolutionary politics is that whiles Marxism created an imaginary universality on the basis of one particularity – the proletariat – 'the anti-globalisation' [sic; parenthetical quotation marks are Newman's] movement creates a *real* universality on the basis of *multiple* particularities, particularities whose identities are themselves contingently constructed through the struggle itself.¹¹³

In saying this, he ignores the actual concern with class common to much of 'the' movement. He not only fails to mention that many within 'the' movement *are* Marxists, socialists and communists but also, and perhaps most shockingly, Newman totally misrepresents the universality which Marx theorised. Marx 'imagined' – promised, actually – that, having seized power and abolished private property, the proletariat would *become* universal; he did not 'imagine' that universality was a given, except in the sense that the 'world market' – global capitalism – was, as he

¹¹² For example, 'class war' has been promised each year on the festival's publicity posters, listed alongside talks, discussions, films and the other contents of the festival.

¹¹³ Newman, *Power*, p.151.

identified, giving chains to all workers.¹¹⁴ Come the glorious day, in other words, the proletariat would no longer be ‘one particularity’: it would be replaced by a universally classless society.

Aside from his problematically dismissive account of Marxism, much of what Newman has to say is valuable and interesting, however. When he claims that ‘anarchism – or *postanarchism* – can be seen as the closest political approximation of poststructuralism’, nevertheless, three problems in his trajectory should not go unremarked in the present context.¹¹⁵ For one thing, as we have seen, there is some debate as to whether the ideas of, for example, Derrida – without question a leading figure within what is known as post-structuralism – are anarchistic or not. It is debatable, in other words, whether the theories of post-structuralism in general and Derrida in particular are closer to anarchism or Marxism. Secondly, it is at the very least questionable that post-structuralism *has* a ‘political approximation’ (given that lengthy books, such as Beardsworth’s painstakingly argued *Derrida and the Political*,

¹¹⁴ For Marx, the proletariat is ‘a class with *radical chains*... a class which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a *particular redress* because the wrong done to it is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general*...’, Marx, Karl, *The Revolutions of 1848* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973), p.15. These comments, written at the moment Marx’s political consciousness was first emerging, then, are a firm riposte to the criticisms Newman would make 150 years later. More than likely, and with some justification, Marx would have considered Newman a ‘bourgeois socialist’ who would ‘wish for a bourgeoisie without a proletariat’, as he puts it in *The Communist Manifesto*, *ibid*, p.93. Newman seems to wish for this in the sense that he seems to think the proletarian class to be a particular rather than a necessarily universal component of capitalist society.

¹¹⁵ Newman, *Power*, p.156.

remain constitutively undecided on this exact question).¹¹⁶ Thirdly, his mention of ‘anarchism – or *postanarchism*’ leaves us with a feeling of uncertainty as to how we should distinguish between the two (a marked contrast, in that respect, with the clear ideological distinction between Leninist-Marxism, on the one hand, and Laclau and Mouffé’s post-Marxism, on the other hand). There is so much of the classical anarchist tradition left out of the post-anarchist idea as Newman draws it such as antipathy towards private property or belief in mutual aid as a natural recurrence, that the supposed proximity is dubious. In short, the proximity of post-anarchism and post-structuralism is debatable at best. Where, for example, is post-structuralism’s problematisation of all origins within Newman’s talk of post-anarchism’s ‘entirely new forms of activism’?¹¹⁷ To talk of an ‘entirely new’ politics of post-structuralism, in short, seems to ignore some cornerstones of this particular philosophical orientation.

An over-arching problem here, and one which can be suggested as an example of Derridean ‘originary repetition’ (see below), is that non-Marxist mass demonstrations against global capitalism simply *aren’t* ‘entirely new’. In May 1968, France was brought almost to a standstill. In August of the same year, Yippies and Hippies brought chaos to the Democratic Convention in Chicago. Need we mention the March actions against the Soviets in Poland? The bloodshed in Yugoslavia that July? And this is far from an exhaustive list. Some of these protests were literal battles with (a supposed form of) Marxism, and some were not, but all were post-Marxist in a strong sense and to a significant extent were anarchistic or at least ‘spontaneous’. These

¹¹⁶ Beardsworth, Richard, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996).

¹¹⁷ Newman, *Power*, p.151.

primarily non-Marxist demonstrations, furthermore, had at least some claim to having a ‘global’ dimension. They were substantially similar, in character and content, to the mass demonstrations seen in Europe and North America in more recent decades.

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between the late-1960s demonstrations and uprisings, on the one hand, and the general thrust of anti-capitalist protests since at least the early 1990s, on the other hand. The cultural tendency on the Left from the mid-1960s onwards, for good or ill, has drifted away from the Marxist faith in class conscious revolution; this much at least should be accepted without controversy.

Traditions of punk have certainly been part of this tendency and, if I may make an auto-biographic observation also hopefully un-controversial, punks have been a notable constituency within the twenty first century protest scene. Many of the politically active punks I know today (some of whom are very active in the organisation of large-scale demonstrations which are sometimes covered in the news) *have been politically active for decades*, for example. As noted above, George McKay has made a persuasive case for the idea that, in short, the mixture of punk and rave cultures which led to the UK’s 1990s *Reclaim the Streets* protests (which in turn were an influence upon the ‘original’ moment of Seattle 1999, I would suggest¹¹⁸) was a continuation of the 1960s protest scene. If this is the case, Newman’s faith that the ‘movement, which is still in its infancy, is a genuinely *contemporary* form of radical

¹¹⁸ In Summer 1999, I spent time with key organisers of the protests such as the volunteers at Seattle’s Left Bank bookshop. I also met many dozens (probably hundreds, over the course of a two month tour) of Left-leaning punks around the US whilst on tour with my band Red Monkey. Of those I met, a great number were planning to travel to Seattle for the protest event in November. Amongst these, interest was enormous with regard to the then-contemporary UK protest scene, especially the ‘Carnival Against Capitalism’ which was held in London on June 18th that year.

politics that *transcends the old paradigms*' must be problematic.¹¹⁹ It would be more accurate to say that there has been a general drift away from the key ideological paradigm of Marxism, at least from the 1960s onwards; the traditions of punk I examine below, in general, have been part of this drift.

Maybe Marxism isn't all that vivacious in the contemporary moment, then, though the title of *Living Marxism* magazine indicates that it is possible to believe otherwise (not to mention the writing of Slavoj Žižek, which Newman invokes¹²⁰). Even harder to take is Newman's claim of an inheritance from Derrida and post-structuralism coupled with casual references to 'transcendence [of] the old' and his greeting of Marxism with an emphatic 'No'.¹²¹ Derrida did not say no to Marx's promise. On the contrary, he declared that

The form of this promise or this project remains absolutely unique. Its event is at once singular, *total*, and uneffaceable... There has been no precedent whatever for such an event... bound to... *worldwide* forms of social organization... Whatever one may think of... the totalitarian perversions... this unique attempt took place. A messianic promise... will have imprinted an inaugural and unique mark in history... And whether we like it or not... we cannot not be its heirs.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Newman, *Power*, p.151.

¹²⁰ For example, the reference to a 'demand for liberty/equality ... *always returning to its place*' is a clear invocation of the writings of Žižek, *ibid*: p.151, emphasis added to one of Žižek's favourite, Lacan-inspired phrases.

¹²¹ Newman, *Power*, p.151.

¹²² Derrida, *Spectres*, pp.113-4, emphasis added.

These comments are hardly a denunciation of Marx's 'universalising' tendency; quite the contrary, it is fair to say: the event of Marx's promise is 'total' without necessarily being totalitarian, Derrida seems to suggest (hence totalitarianism as perversion of the promise, though Derrida does appear concerned about Marx having 'rushed headlong toward an ontological content', we can note¹²³). It is precisely as a result of such words of respect for Marx that Derrida's detractors have expressed exasperation at his seemingly contradictory proposal for the New International:

It is an untimely link, without status, without title, and without name, barely even public even if it is not clandestine, without contract, 'out of joint', without coordination, without party, without country, national community... without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class.¹²⁴

The above words have been quoted repeatedly by Derrida's complainants, the 'good' Marxists who, in the anthology *Ghostly Demarcations*, often seem to read this as a denial that there remains a working class in existence, though Derrida actually makes no such claim here nor anywhere else.¹²⁵ Pessimistic readings of Derrida often seem to lack a willingness to consider the *future* which he is so clearly interested in when he (repeatedly) talks of the 'democracy to come'.¹²⁶ For example, directly prior to the

¹²³ Ibid: p.114.

¹²⁴ Ibid: pp.106-7.

¹²⁵ For Derrida's response to these complainants, see 'Marx and Sons' in Derrida et al, *Ghostly*, pp.213-269.

¹²⁶ Terry Eagleton's attack is particularly hostile, 'Marxism Without Marxism' in Derrida et al, *Ghostly*, pp.82-87. For example, his complaint that Derrida's extended work on Marxism 'has, as the actress said to the Bishop, been an unconscionably long time coming' seems inappropriate in the

quotation above, Derrida calls for ‘a new international law... a link of affinity, suffering, and hope, a still discreet, almost secret link, as it was around 1848’.

Derrida’s point, in other words, is that the ‘spectre [which was] haunting Europe’ in the year Marx and Engels published their manifesto is not only haunting us still but also *will haunt us until new international solutions are arrived at*. The negation put forward above (‘without status.., title.., party’ and so on) might appear Stirner-esque in its veneer of de-socialisation. However, one can hardly propose Derrida as casual with regard to his theories regarding the (im)possibility of pure subjectivity, as we have seen.

On the contrary, Derrida takes politics seriously, at least in his later writings: more seriously, perhaps, or at least more critically, than even the most ‘intellectual’ of punks (Penny Rimbaud of Crass, say, whose ideas will be examined in chapter three); in any case, at greater length in terms of written texts. Punks *have* taken on a certain anarchism in rhetoric and practice, however. Mark Sinker, whose comments were quoted near the top of this chapter, for example, has talked of punk community needing to exist only by chance in order to ensure validity according to its *own* ethos. Punks (again, Penny Rimbaud is a good example, but there are many) have often wanted a form of equity or mutuality of some stripe. Many have desired pacifism, placing a once hippy-invoking CND sign next to the circled A that – post-punk – has come to symbolise anarchism. Many have fought for animal rights.

extreme. Likewise, Eagleton’s attempt to mock Derrida’s writing style: ‘What is it, now, to chew carrots? ... Could one even speak of the “chewing” of a carrot, and if so how, to whom, with what onto-teleo-theological animus?’, p.85. The put down is particularly odd given that, as Derrida notes, philosophical abstraction is hardly anathema to Marx and the material world – carrots included – is hardly presumed by Marx to be a given (set of) object(s).

Derrida's interest in disarmament, in animals and in what he calls *justice* means that his work is valuable to a study of the underground traditions of punk. He suggested, in 2003, that 'the event... should remain disarmed, utterly disarmed', using a term which appeared a fair bit in his later writing, though the emblem should not necessarily be confused with disarmament as in CND.¹²⁷ Likewise, his declaration that he was 'on principle sympathetic with those who, it seems to me, are in the right and have good reason to rise up against the way animals are treated' falls short of the full embracement of animal rights which punk bands such as Conflict and Flux of Pink Indians made and insisted others should make.¹²⁸ Nevertheless, his arguably anarchistic politics in general, and in particular his concept of justice, mean that his ideas can allow a critical look at the subtlest depths of underground punk's politics of empowerment.

Section Summary

Socialism and anarchism developed differing paths during the nineteenth century, yet there remains much in common between the two. Marx's theories developed a

¹²⁷ Derrida, 'A Certain' in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, p.234. It is worth noting, that said, that numbers six and seven of the famous list of ten plagues of global capitalism offered in *Spectres of Marx* are the arms trade and the spread of nuclear weapons respectively. It may be, then, that Derrida had some sympathy with resistance to the proliferation of nuclear warheads.

¹²⁸ Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What*, p.64. For more on Conflict, see chapter three. Derrida states that the animal rights 'discourse often seems to me poorly articulated or philosophically inconsistent' but, as noted above and as reflected in many of his late writings, he was nevertheless markedly interested in issues around animals and their treatment.

particular division between socialism and anarchism by insisting that only class consciousness could transform social relations, and also that this transformation would have to be universal. Issues of leadership and the role of the state were also significant elements of difference. More recently, since the 1960s, anarchistic approaches have become increasingly popular on the Left, whilst interest in Marxism has dwindled. Thinkers within the post-structuralist orientation have been perceived to have formed part of this drift away from Marxism, at least since the French uprising of May 1968. Some have even written of post-Marxism and, more recently, post-anarchism. A few scholars associated with the latter have dismissed Marxism in a way which can be problematised. Derrida, by contrast, treads a subtle and sometimes contradictory path between Marxist and anarchist theories, and one which I will argue has key elements in common with the political ideals of the punk underground. His concept of justice will be argued, in the next section, as a key element of his later work; a concept through which efficacy in punk's anarchistic politics of empowerment might perhaps become possible.

iii. Justice to Come and the Micromatic Recoil

In 1897, anarchist theorist Peter Kropotkin wrote that ‘Law has perverted the feeling of justice instead of developing it’.¹²⁹ A century later, Derrida’s arguments have been markedly similar: law, he has stated, must be distinguished from justice whilst justice, if there is such a thing, is not exactly a concrete presence (more of a ‘feeling’, perhaps then) and is yet to arrive (it might be ‘developing’, we could say). Like Kropotkin’s, in other words, Derrida’s idea of justice is both distinct from law and also is something of a ‘non-presence’ which ought to be developed; in Derridean terms, justice is a future which is ‘to come’ (*à venir*).¹³⁰

The purpose of the present section is, in the first instance, to discuss some differing views as to what this justice might or might not be(come) and, secondly, to develop a somewhat deconstructive reading of Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* by focusing on the text’s theories of weakness (I use the last word deliberately). Through this deconstruction I will develop a concept of *micromatic* ‘relationality’. This last word has been placed in quotation marks because my concept, being an extension from Derridean theory, should not talk of relations as if they are too easily fused, as if the relation between self and other can too easily gain equity. Similarly, I hope that the concept captures something of the way Mark Sinker and others want to think of punk community: as a coincidence which is betrayed when planned towards and which must not be nurtured with ‘obligations’ or laws.

¹²⁹ Kropotkin, *Anarchist*, pp.36-7.

¹³⁰ Derrida’s talk of a justice and a democracy *à venir* [to come] hints at a future [*avenir*: future] which will always be postponed, which is always yet to arrive.

The usefulness and validity (or otherwise) of Derrida's work on justice, like much of his thinking, has been hotly contested. J. Hillis Miller, for example, focuses on Derrida's famous statement that '*Tout autre est tout autre*' and concludes that 'His concepts of ethics and of community are consonant with the assumption of each ego's inescapable solitude. According to Derrida, I remain alone, on my own, however much I may be open to the ethical demand each other, though wholly other, makes on me.'¹³¹

For Miller, '*Tout autre est tout autre*' translates as 'Every other (one) is every (bit) other'. The translation is not necessarily bad. It's just that there are other, more contextually suitable ways of reading this statement, and well-known Derridean 'infrastructures' – auto-immunity, supplementarity, archē-trace and perhaps most of all the key concept in *Spectres of Marx* of hauntology – which would seem to entirely contradict Miller's contention that 'For Derrida, no isthmus, no bridge, no road, no communication or transfer, connects or can ever connect my enisled self to other selves'.¹³²

Miller is the extreme case of a pessimistic reader of Derrida. At the opposite end of the spectrum would be Christina Howells. Howells addresses the accusation that Derrida's work falls into a 'quasi-nihilistic abdication in the face of the ethico-

¹³¹ Miller, J. Hillis, 'Derrida Enisled', in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, pp.30-58: 30. *Chambers Dictionary* 1998 defines 'enisle' as 'to put on or make into an island; to isolate'.

¹³² Ibid: p.58. It is Gasché who talks of explicitly non-Marxist 'infrastructures' in Derrida's work (see above). As I see it, 'concepts' is a perfectly acceptable alternative word.

political-juridical question of justice and the opposition of justice and injustice’ (Derrida’s words).¹³³ Unlike Miller and like-minded complainants, however, Howells also notes that, when Derrida says justice is impossible, he has added that ‘it is possible as an experience of the impossible’ rather than being impossible in an absolute sense.¹³⁴ Derrida has been very clear on the possibility of this possibility of the impossible, in a tract on the subject of forgiveness:

Forgiveness, if there is any, must forgive that which is unforgivable otherwise it is not forgiveness. Forgiving, if it is possible, can only come to be as impossible. But this impossibility is not simply negative. This means *the impossible must be done*. The event, if there is one, consists in doing the impossible.¹³⁵

In fact, this is precisely the purpose of Derrida’s regular offerings of apparently paradoxical oppositions (‘messianic without messianism’, ‘A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event’, self as other, trace as paradoxical ‘presence’ of an absence, and so on): we can not transcend the paradoxes, Derrida seems to say, but by thinking and talking of them, we can consider where the theoretical problems lie. Such a consideration might seem reasonable for a philosopher, but many readers’ frustration with Derrida is also understandable, for his constant invocations of paradoxes preclude any easy resolutions.

¹³³ Quoted in Howells, Christina, *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p.155.

¹³⁴ Derrida quoted in *ibid*, p.155.

¹³⁵ Derrida in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, p.231, emphasis added.

That given, the crucial element for a more optimistic reading of Derrida is to keep in sight his insistence that his paradoxes are ‘not simply negative’. In Howells’s words, ‘we may feel as frustrated as Alice when she learnt the principle of “jam tomorrow but never jam today”, but we will also be enlightened’.¹³⁶ This feeling of enlightenment leads Howells to conclude her book with the optimistic declaration that Derrida’s late work ‘appears to be pursuing a very different ethical and political agenda, and one which arguably supports Derrida’s bold claim that deconstruction is justice’.¹³⁷

On Howell’s view, the key to understanding Derridean politics is the concept of ‘time out of joint’, which Derrida figures as the pre-condition of justice: ‘It is the mismatch between law and justice, between justice as (in Levinas’s terms) “the relation with the Other” and law as rules, norms and juridico-moral representations which is the very (paradoxical) condition of justice, and, as Derrida already hints, of deconstruction itself’.¹³⁸ She finds certain canonical readings of Derrida to be too pessimistic: ‘Just as [Simon] Critchley argued that there can be no ethics of deconstruction, so [Richard] Beardsworth argues that there can be no politics of deconstruction’.¹³⁹ With a close reading of Derrida’s work on Levinas, she suggests that he ‘has a very different view from Beardsworth’ in particular.¹⁴⁰ With regard to Critchley, she finds it ‘difficult to subscribe’ to his reading of Derrida reading Levinas which ‘repeats rather than clarifies the obscurities surrounding’ the differences between these two important

¹³⁶ Howell, *Derrida*, p.153.

¹³⁷ Ibid: p.156.

¹³⁸ Ibid: p.152.

¹³⁹ Ibid: p.137.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid: p.148.

French philosophers' theories of justice, ethics and politics. It is hopefully clear by now, therefore, that we will need to consider Levinas if we want to know something of Derrida's views on the matters at hand, and that consideration of the work of Critchley and Beardsworth will also be valuable in any consideration of the politics and ethics of Derrida.

Ethics, Politics and Justice

Simon Critchley, in his 1992 text *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, offers a clear refutation of the idea that Derrida is an 'amoral anarchist' or a fascist.¹⁴¹ Nevertheless, he argued at that time that 'there is an impasse of the political in Derrida's work', though his 1999 preface to the second edition states that 'based on a reading of Derrida's work since 1992, I am more positive about the political possibilities of deconstruction'.¹⁴² The alleged impasse is significant for our purposes because, if Critchley's earlier assessment is correct, then punk's politics of empowerment would seem certain to fail: if, as I am arguing, the punk community wants to arrive as something akin to a Derridean event of justice, but this Derridean idea is founded on an impasse of the political, then the effort would be futile, in other words. If, by contrast, there *are* after all some 'positive political possibilities' in Derrida's theories, and if I am right to suggest that much of the thinking behind the punk underground is

¹⁴¹ Critchley, *Ethics of*, p.196.

¹⁴² *Ibid*: p.xiv, p.xii.

similar to these theories, it might be possible to construct a post-Derridean ‘justification’ of punk’s politics of micro-empowerment.¹⁴³

The first important point to make is that the ‘ethics’ about which Derrida, Levinas and Critchley are theorising is distinct from ‘the domain of the ethical, traditionally understood’ on account of a lack of concern with moral laws, again as traditionally understood.¹⁴⁴ Instead, ethics for these thinkers means a relation to the other, essentially, or perhaps better put the *demand* of the other. According to Critchley, ‘Politics begins as ethics’, an important claim to which we will return shortly.¹⁴⁵

For Miller, the difference between Derrida’s and Levinas’s conceptions of ethics is ‘no more than a nuance’.¹⁴⁶ Derrida acknowledged as much himself, with a deep interest in Levinas’s work clearly shown in numerous texts, and mutual respect reflected in texts from Levinas.¹⁴⁷ For both of these French thinkers, any response to the ethical demand of the other will be interrupted by a fundamental asymmetry (or, for Derrida, ‘dissymetry’) between the self and the other. This interruption is

¹⁴³ Such a possibility is certainly being searched for in the present chapter. The word justification requires quotation marks, however, because, if fidelity to Derrida’s ideas is to be retained at all, no justice nor justification should be proposed as being fixable as ‘law’.

¹⁴⁴ Critchley, *Ethics of*, p.96.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid: p.48.

¹⁴⁶ Miller in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, p.40.

¹⁴⁷ Indeed, several of Derrida’s key terms and concepts – such as trace, justice, the inscription of *avenir* as *à venir* (emphasising the infinite non-arrival of the future) and more – had earlier been utilised by Levinas in similar contexts. Levinas’s responses to Derrida are well summarised in Critchley’s chapter four of *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, sub-titled ‘Wholly Otherwise: Levinas’s Reading of Derrida’, pp145-187.

constitutive of the ethical relationship because, were it possible to circumnavigate the asymmetrical interruption, the ethical responsibility would become a pure connection through which alterity would cease to function. Why, the reader might then want to know, should maintenance of alterity be valuable in this ethical relationship? In short, it is valuable because it is the alterity of the other which demands ethical responsibility in the first instance; without alterity, 'the other' moves into the sphere of 'the same' and the ethical response evaporates in to a transcendent connection which, post-Kant, philosophers have consistently striven to problematise. Responsibility to the other *as* other, then, is crucial to the ethical thinking of both Derrida and Levinas: it does not circumscribe all thought of collectivity yet, in the words of Levinas, it allows a theory of 'collectivity that is not a communion'.¹⁴⁸

Though Derrida and Levinas share an interest in asymmetrical collectivity, however, the nuance of difference between their ethics remains of interest. It is founded upon some issues surrounding the singularity of the Other, the role of the third party (*le tiers*) and a certain Levinasian distinction between the 'saying' and the 'said'.¹⁴⁹ The last point is too complex and peripheral to be covered in any depth here but, in short, Derrida asserts that Levinas prioritises the importance of the saying over and above the said but does this, by necessity, in the language of the said. (Some have argued that Levinas's separation of the saying from the said corresponds in large part to

¹⁴⁸ Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1979), translated by Cohen, Richard A., p.94.

¹⁴⁹ Several writers on Levinas remark that his uses of *autre*, *Autre*, *autres* and so on are confusingly inconsistent. I shall use the capitalised Other here to suggest Levinas's concept of the singular other, separate from *le tiers* (the third party).

Lacan's distinction between *énoncé* and *énonciation*.¹⁵⁰) Levinas, by several accounts, subsequently placed a similar accusation at Derrida's door.¹⁵¹

Issues relating to the singular Other and the third party are more significant for us. For Levinas, it is the *face* of the other which constitutes the pre-political ethical relation, a certain physical presence which goes beyond any thinking of *all the others*, in some sense at least. For Derrida, by contrast, this Other is always already a representative of the third party, always already infinitely multiple, always representative of the *others*:

It is impossible to address only one person, only one man, only one woman. To put it bluntly and without pathos, such an address would have to be *each time one single time*, and all iterability would have to be excluded from the structure of the trace. Now, for one person to receive a single mark once, the mark must be, however minimally, identifiable, hence iterable, hence interiorally multiple and divided in its occurrence – in any case of its eventness [*événementialité*].
The third party is there.¹⁵²

Such suggestions problematised Levinas's thinking of the (singular) Other. According to Derrida, Levinas had 'defined the relationship to the ethical as a face-to-face with the other and then he eventually had to admit that in [this] dual relation... the Third is

¹⁵⁰ For example, Critchley, *Ethics of*, p.164.

¹⁵¹ Critchley finds Levinas's criticisms of Derrida 'hauntingly analogous to those raised by Derrida "against" Levinas', for example, *ibid*: p.145.

¹⁵² Derrida, *Politics of*, p.215.

present too'.¹⁵³ Having made this admission, Levinas subsequently formulated a particular view of justice as, according to Critchley, 'the limit of responsibility':

It is the moment when I am no longer infinitely responsible for the Other, and consequently no longer in an asymmetrical, unequal relation. Rather, justice is [in Levinas's words] 'an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity', where I become the Other's equal. In justice, I am no longer myself in relation to an Other for whom I am infinitely responsible, but I can feel myself to be an other like the others – that is, one of a community that can demand its rights regardless of its duties.¹⁵⁴

For Critchley, this would be the passage from ethics to politics which shows the way out of the supposed Derridean impasse of the political: 'the move that deconstruction is unable to make – what I have called its impasse – concerns the passage from undecidability to the decision, from responsibility to questioning, from deconstruction to critique, from ethics to politics'.¹⁵⁵ As noted, however, Critchley later became 'more positive' about the political horizon of deconstruction. Latterly he has produced work which could reasonably be defined as, broadly speaking, post-anarchist in its outlook.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Derrida in Mitchell and Davidson, *The Late*, p.226.

¹⁵⁴ Critchley, *Ethics of*, p.231.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid: p.236.

¹⁵⁶ Critchley Simon, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007). The text is post-anarchist in the sense that it proposes 'we are stuck with the state' whereas classical anarchism is of course militantly opposed to the state as such and statism in general, pp.112-3. As with Newman's presumption that contemporary anarchism ('the anti-globalisation

Work on Derrida by Richard Beardsworth is slightly less pessimistic than Critchley's as to the political potential of deconstruction. Beardsworth argues emphatically that 'there can be no politics of deconstruction' but nevertheless anticipates that Derrida's method 'can have an effect on political thinking and decision-making'.¹⁵⁷ This would be consequent to 'Derrida's thinking of originary repetition and of the promise [which] reveals the contradictions in modern democratic thought and thereby *reinvents* our relation to these contradictions according to the lesser violence'.¹⁵⁸ The crucial terms in this theorem, for our purposes at least, are 'originary repetition' and 'lesser violence'. Both word-pairs appear regularly in Beardsworth's *Derrida and the Political*. Originary repetition is his term for Derrida's conception, already mentioned above, that every re-mark's iterability renders each mark 'new' in an absolute and overall way. Lesser violence, meanwhile, is tied to Derrida's idea that inscription (including the speech mark, which remains a 'writing' in Derridean terms) is violence, as we noted in the introduction. Beardsworth traces the idea of the lesser violence to Derrida's 1967 text *Of Grammatology* in which 'a tertiary structure of violence recognizes the necessity of violence in such a way that the terms of this violence can

movement') is little concerned with issues of class, Critchley's apparent desire in *Infinitely Demanding* to speak for the contemporary anti-capitalist protest scene is highly problematic since, as with classical anarchism, contemporary anarchism remains vociferous in its opposition to statism. If Critchley is post-anarchist, then, it does not necessarily follow that 'the anti-globalisation movement' is, we can conclude.

¹⁵⁷ Beardsworth, *Derrida*, p.20.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*: p.46, emphasis retained.

be transformed'.¹⁵⁹ This transformation, it seems, would conditionalise the lesser violence through what Derrida calls *aporia*.

Aporia, though the term derives from classical Greek philosophy, is given a special weight and particular inference by Derrida. Beardsworth notes that this weighting is quite different from the way Aristotle uses the term.¹⁶⁰ Aporia, for Derrida, is not simply a presentation of a paradoxical choice between two contradictory things. On the contrary, 'the "contradiction" applies to one and the same entity, not to two different entities' in, for example, Derrida's conception of the aporia of time. 'We called this [the "contradiction"], following Derrida, "originary repetition". It is this repetition which is aporetic, as is the originary repetition of law'.¹⁶¹ These two – the aporia of time and the aporia of law – are both conditioned by an originary repetition, then. Beardsworth's subsequent insistence that 'No judgement is possible without the experience of aporia' is faithful enough to the arguments of Derrida; given the linkage Beardsworth has made between aporia and originary repetition, furthermore, we might also insist that every judgement must necessarily be new, therefore.¹⁶²

That given, we might begin to wonder whether judgement (as a mark of decision) is violence. Derrida hints that this might be avoidable provided that '*jugement à nouveaux frais*' (fresh judgement) is in play: law cannot result in justice precisely

¹⁵⁹ Ibid: p.20.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid: p.32.

¹⁶¹ Ibid: p.32.

¹⁶² Ibid: p.33.

because a judgement contingent upon a law means that the judgement has been given in advance and therefore is not judgement at all; fresh judgement, on the other hand, gains some independence from law (meaning that re-iteration of any mark of judgement will not necessarily produce justice).¹⁶³ Aporia thus becomes crucial for justice because aporia is the pre-condition for fresh judgement: if the judgement is fresh, if it avoids reliance upon law (including law as *any* re-marking of some prior decision), justice could perhaps become possible. It is for this reason that Derrida will often follow any mention of justice (amongst other things, including deconstruction) with the parenthetical rejoinder 'if there is such a thing'. There may be no justice then; and no non-violence, perhaps. Derrida's commitment to the importance of aporetic undecidability is such that, for example, the possibility of an impossibility of justice must be kept in view precisely in order for the condition of justice to become possible.

Beardsworth, for his part, clearly wants to consider the possibility of a lesser violence but, like Derrida, is not prepared to talk of any existing non-violence.¹⁶⁴ His mention of a 'Modern politics *of* violence' constituted by 'Fascism (and racial struggle) and Marxism (and class struggle)' is noteworthy, however.¹⁶⁵ It is fair to say, indeed, that Beardsworth, like many post-1960s philosophers, has a limited respect for Marx and is prepared to imply a similarity between fascism and communism by dint of a shared totalitarianism/universalism. Thus he states baldly that Marx 'simplifies Hegel... by

¹⁶³ For more detail on Derrida's insistence upon the need for justice from '*jugement à nouveaux frais*', see Callinicos in Glendinning and Eaglestone, *Derrida's*, p.82.

¹⁶⁴ He refers explicitly to 'the inescapability of violence', *ibid*: p.95. His wording is more emphatic here than anything I can recall reading in Derrida, it is worth adding.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*: p.50. emphasis retained.

“positing” the social universality of one class’ and that he ‘gives the wrong reasons when he argues for the reversal of Hegelian idealism’.¹⁶⁶ For Beardsworth, a post-Marxist ‘invention’ is necessary ‘today’ in order to avoid being ‘foolish’:

We live today in a world which is increasingly violent, less and less politicised. It would be foolish not to see in this ‘depoliticization’ a sign of an end to political ontology, at least... If one therefore wishes to rearticulate this depoliticization... an aporetic invention of politics is called for.¹⁶⁷

By ‘political ontology’, Beardsworth means to gesture at the Marxist theory which ‘Derrida’s thinking of aporia must be placed in the context of’ (despite the ontology’s supposed end in sight, it seems).¹⁶⁸ It is fair to say, then, that for Beardsworth a post-Marxist position is discernible, if not a ‘post-anarchist’ one.¹⁶⁹ Only by ‘enduring the experience of the aporia of law (and) time’, he insists, can we invent a ‘greater chance of recognizing difference according to the lesser violence’.¹⁷⁰ The endurance of which he writes is anarchistic in the sense that it rejects universalism (instead promoting aporia), rejects ‘political ontology’ and suggests a certain *opening on to the question* which classical Marxists would almost certainly consider as the locus of a

¹⁶⁶ Ibid: pp.94-5.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid: p.95.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid: p.95.

¹⁶⁹ It should be added, nevertheless, that Beardsworth has a clear interest in and respect for Marx’s theories of sensible matter as product of social agency (Marxist materialism, that is). This is subtly evident in his conclusion when he discusses ‘technics’, but also at other points such as a suggestion that Marx’s thoughts on matter are just what is missing from Derrida’s account, *ibid*: p.97.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid: p.101.

‘spontaneous’ and therefore *bourgeois individualist* ideology. He resists the universality of Marxism on account of its ‘politics of violence’ but *without* aporia; a politics *without* the chance of lesser violence, Beardsworth seems to say.

If there is something a little pessimistic about his reading of Derrida, at least from a Marxist point of view, it is perhaps fair to say that Beardsworth’s reading is more optimistic than Miller’s. For example, he renders ‘*Tout autre est tout autre*’ as ‘Every other is quite other’ where, for Miller, the French statement infers that ‘Every other (one) is every (bit) other’, as we have seen.¹⁷¹ The difference is subtle. It hinges upon what I read as Miller’s fundamental misunderstanding of Derrida: for the latter, there can be no ‘other (one)’ in the sense that Miller reads ‘*autre*’. This, indeed, is one of the many things which Derrida and Levinas seem to have eventually agreed upon, as Beardsworth makes clear: ‘the Other is always interrupted by the others (“*les autres autres*”, as Derrida renders it), meaning that the third party (*le tiers*) is always already present when the self is faced with the Levinasian Other’.¹⁷²

There is an important difference between Levinas’s and Derrida’s emphases, however, and it is a difference of which Miller’s account is helpful to our understanding. For Levinas, a firm interest in ethical relations means that, although every other is wholly other, nevertheless some possibility of a *just community* in which respect for the otherness of others could endure seems to remain worth talking about. This is reflected in Michael Thomas’s claim that Levinas has faith in ‘A just community [which] would be based on the constitutive existence of dissension and

¹⁷¹ Ibid: p.140.

¹⁷² Ibid: p.140.

conflict'.¹⁷³ For Derrida, by contrast, 'the word "community" [always] bothers me', as we have seen. Miller's suggestion that Derrida theorises an 'enlaid' individual is not entirely unfounded, therefore, but is far too heavily emphasised. We can say, in any case, that the ethical community which Thomas finds in the work of Levinas is something which Derrida seems to want to problematise: Derrida has not made the leap to theorising about community as has been made by his sometime pupil Jean Luc Nancy.¹⁷⁴

A willingness to deconstruct the concept of community *at all levels*, then, certainly does make Derrida's concept of justice problematic in political terms. This is especially so for the Left, for whom class solidarity has been paramount: how is one to militate around a principle which would deny the fundamentality of community? This problem has caused frustration even amongst his more sympathetic readers. For example, though optimistic overall about Derrida's search for 'the right conclusion', Alex Callinicos reaches frustration point on precisely the question as to whether the deconstruction of all discourse is valuable: 'Sometimes a cigar just is a cigar; and sometimes there just is a dominant discourse', he declares, seemingly exasperated

¹⁷³ Thomas, *The Reception*, p.166.

¹⁷⁴ Derrida seems to have had a great love of Nancy, perhaps most strongly reflected in his very late text *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005). Whilst reflecting Derrida's love for and advocacy of his *protégé* (which is what Nancy is normally considered to be), in this text Derrida wants to query and ultimately resist any notion of immediacy through touch. In keeping with his general trajectory, in other words, Derrida question the most basic foundations of community and friendship, and thereby questions the validity of his friend's major concern (Nancy's somewhat post-deconstructive thinking of community, that is).

with Derrida's constant problematisation of the word 'is'.¹⁷⁵ On his view, that said, the '*altermondialiste*' anti-capitalist/anti-globalisation movement has a 'remarkable anticipation' in Derrida's concept of the New International. Callinicos has some political optimism with regard to deconstruction, then, yet is ultimately pessimistic ('doubtful') as to what extent the Derridean conception of justice can aid the protest movement in question.¹⁷⁶ He makes no secret that, for him, the 'right conclusion' is a Marxist conclusion, though we might add here that, for Marx, the idea that a cigar is ever just a cigar would be anathema, in fact.

Clearly, then, there is significant room for differing interpretations in terms of optimistic and pessimistic readings of Derrida's political writings. Michael Thomas, to give another example, criticises Habermas and others 'who have not understood the importance of Derrida's deconstruction of western metaphysics'[s] conception of temporality'.¹⁷⁷ He considers that Beardsworth's writings, and also work on Derrida by Geoffrey Bennington, support his argument that it is 'possible to found a recognisably Marxist politics without ontology'.¹⁷⁸ What unites Thomas, Callinicos, Beardsworth, Critchley and others' readings of Derrida is an awareness that the Derridean conception of justice differs from Marxism at the very least in respect of a non-ontologising, non-universalist and thoroughly aporetic conception of what could

¹⁷⁵ Callinicos in Glendinning and Eaglestone, Derrida's, pp.86-7.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid: pp.85-86.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas: p.171.

¹⁷⁸ Bennington, Geoffrey, Derrida, Jacques, *Jacques Derrida: Derridabase/Circumfession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). Like Beardsworth and Critchley, Bennington focuses on Derrida's Levinasian emphasis upon 'dissymetry' in ethical/political relations, eg. p.235.

make justice possible. Justice, if there is such a thing, demands a universal lack of universality, to coin a paradox somewhat in the style of Derrida.

If I am right, then, in thinking that many of the agents of the punk underground hold an ambition to gain something akin to a Derridean justice, perhaps they ought to admit that any transformation they might glimpse thereby could only ever be micro-social, could never create a macro-social transformation. This impotence in the face of macro-social politics would be consequent to the very lack of a universal programme (as in Marxism). It is precisely this element which leads Stephen Duncombe to complain that ‘zine culture is *small culture*. And, as such it abandons the only large-scale, coherent “common culture” today to consumer capitalism.’¹⁷⁹ Duncombe identifies zine culture with ‘the underground’ and correctly notes that punk has been ‘the defining influence on modern-day zines’ since the 1970s (indeed, his own epiphany regarding the value of zines/the underground is revealed to be a product of his involvement in punk).¹⁸⁰ With a concurrent involvement in radical activism, Duncombe is inspired by the underground community’s ability to encourage a certain political recognition but is simultaneously somewhat pessimistic as to the potential for this to result in mass political action and a more significant social transformation.

Duncombe’s concerns resonate strongly with the comments of George McKay (see above): punk/DiY/the underground is inspiring and exciting because it empowers (in particular) the young with a sense of new possibilities. This new-sense, as I have called it, however, ultimately weakens the Left by ignoring macro-social issues such

¹⁷⁹ Duncombe, *Notes*, pp.185-6, emphasis retained.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*: p.7 and p.1.

as class and by substituting local ‘solutions’ for universalist strategies, as well as by failing to learn lessons from ‘the old’, according to Duncombe. Derrida has certainly shown an awareness of this general problem, stating that ‘the more the new erupts in the revolutionary crisis, the more the period is in crisis, the more it is “out of joint”, then the more one has to convoke the old, “borrow” from it’.¹⁸¹ An example of this process, indeed, might be Derrida’s own deconstructive work on Marx where he borrowed from ‘at least one of [Marx’s] spirits’ (to quote again from *Spectres of Marx*) at the very moment (the early 1990s) when some were arguing the final defeat of communism had arrived.

Derrida convoked Marx, borrowed from his (by now, old) ideas. His interjection was at the same time new, however, in that it broke with significant aspects of Marxism, most important amongst which would be the universalising aspect sometimes described as Marxist ontology. As we have seen, this trajectory has caused frustration even amongst those sympathetic to Derrida’s theories, principally because it is perceived to disempower the Left and perhaps even to involve an impasse of the political. For his own part, however, Derrida has argued that this apparently disempowering aspect of his theories can paradoxically lead to a certain strength, ‘the greatest strength’ he even dares to claim. I turn now to this paradox, which I will argue revolves in large part around issues of community/collectivity, micro-sociality and what Derrida calls a ‘politics of friendship’.

¹⁸¹ Derrida, *Spectres*, p.136.

The Micromatic Recoil and the Politics of Friendship

‘O my friends, there is no friend.’

I am addressing you, am I not?

How many of us are there?¹⁸²

From the first words of Derrida’s *Politics of Friendship* onwards, there is an evident concern with the *number* of participants in a discourse and, implicitly, with the question as to whether it is possible to address just one friend. The quotation (‘O my friends...’) has been attributed to Aristotle and discussed at length elsewhere (most notably by Nietzsche, whose writings on this topic are a point of focus in Derrida’s book). *Politics of Friendship* is in large part a colossal deconstruction of these few words. The implication that friendship is impossible *per se*, in one reading Derrida offers, or that having only one *singular* friend is impossible, in another of his readings, are just two of the various interpretations he offers. We can concern ourselves here, more pertinently, with the two questions which follow the lead statement. The second of these (‘How many of us are there?’) comes back again and again, in various forms, throughout the text. They are the first words of page two, for example, but are still being returned to on page 231, in a rumination on

the questions of responsibility [which] remain here among us (but then *how many of us are there?*). How is this responsibility to be exercised in the best possible way? How will we know if there is *philia* or *homónia* between us, if we

¹⁸² Derrida, *Politics of*, p.1, sentence spacing retained from original.

are getting on well, at what moment and to what degree? How are we to distinguish between ourselves, between each of us who compose this as yet undetermined ‘we’?¹⁸³

The themes are familiar by now from the secondary texts already mentioned above: responsibility, undecideability, the ethical need to keep in view the radical otherness of the other. Why, we might wonder, does Derrida keep returning to the question of *how many*, however? If Miller was correct about Derrida’s beliefs, the answer could only be one – the enisled self. If Critchley was correct, Derrida (unlike Levinas) could never think it possible to be ‘one of a community’ consequent to an impasse of the political in the deconstructive method. Having said that, if Howell, Thomas and others are correct in optimistically foreseeing a chance for justice after Derrida, perhaps this question of *how many friends* in fact reflects a deep desire in Derrida to think possible a (non-universal) community? Perhaps, in other words, the standard readings of *Politics of Friendship*, which tend to see the book as an outright denial of the possibility of friendship, have missed a thread which twines from the beginning of the book onwards?

Christina Howells, being what I would characterise as an optimistic reader of Derrida, does not fail to notice the thread in question. Correctly noting that ‘Even the communality at the heart of community is put in question’ in *Politics of Friendship*, she goes on to emphasise that ‘In the end he feels obliged to spell out what he might have hoped was self-evident... [namely that] in deconstructing the concepts of

¹⁸³ Derrida, *Politics of*, p.231, emphasis added.

friendship, fraternity, community and democracy, Derrida is not, he insists, *opposing* them; he believes in the merits of a democratic system'.¹⁸⁴

The reading is bold: Derrida 'believes' in (or, at least, is not 'opposed to'), for example, 'community', it is implied. Perhaps Howells has got it wrong, of course. I should add, that said, that my reading of Derrida resonates with hers in large part: I read, in many moments within Derrida's texts, a hint of a belief in a possible community and a possible friendship, that is. I would acknowledge, that said, that the hint is always aporetic, and quite deliberately so in all likelihood. The hints, in other words, are subtle, ambiguous and, it should be said, not necessarily always intentional. For example, early in *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida flags up an interest in 'the reciprocalist or *mutualist* schema of requited friendship'.¹⁸⁵ What is notable, in what I read as Derrida's hint, is that this is done with marked hesitancy – 'if I may use the term', he begs, probably conscious of the anarchistic overtone.¹⁸⁶ Perhaps, by begging the reader's permission ('if I may'), Derrida creates an aporetic demand for a decision. It is possible, in any case, to read Derrida as hinting that friendship, fraternity and community, though these concepts require deconstruction, could be valuable; this, after all, is the possibility which Howells raises.

The hint, if Derrida is giving such a thing, is no more than a hint. The schema to which Derrida refers, that is, is shown to be far from straightforward even when

¹⁸⁴ Ibid: p.150.

¹⁸⁵ Derrida, *Politics of*, p.10, emphasis retained.

¹⁸⁶ Derrida, *Politics of*, p.10, emphasis retained. The anarchistic overtone is on account of Derrida's use of the word 'mutualist', recalling as it does the writings of Peter Kropotkin in particular.

seeming to be between two persons, as one might expect from the deconstructionist: “‘Good friendship’ supposes disproportion. It demands a certain rupture in reciprocity or equality, as well as the interruption of all fusion or confusion between you and me.’¹⁸⁷ Here, Derrida demonstrates a desire to problematise reciprocity and mutualism beyond any such desire in many other contemporary thinkers. For example, Luce Irigaray has recently shown a wish to theorise ‘a reciprocity [which] does not amount to giving back’, thus demonstrating a degree of similarity to Derrida’s program.¹⁸⁸ However, Irigaray’s mention of ‘a mutual respect between different subjectivities’ precedes a proclamation that ‘No doubt, in love man and woman sometimes for a moment become *just* one’.¹⁸⁹ It is fair to say that, here, Irigaray claims as present that which, for Derrida, can only be an aporetic opening of possibility or impossibility. For Derrida, in other words, the moment when ‘We have crossed the threshold... becoming two in one... for a fleeting instant’ cannot be quite so comfortably invoked.¹⁹⁰ Irigaray wants to return to a somewhat Levinasian perspective in which ‘the privileged relation is, or ought to be, to or with another human’.¹⁹¹ It is a perspective which Derrida has already critiqued at length, as we have seen, and the

¹⁸⁷ Ibid: p.62. Elsewhere, he notes that the ‘requirement of reciprocity [in friendship] is one of the most obscure themes of the doctrine’ of Aristotle, p.207. Given that he goes on to comment that ‘We shall not say here what is true or false’ with regard to Aristotle, it is fair to wonder whether Derrida held at least some degree of ambivalence on the question of reciprocity in friendship; perhaps a view that any relationship must be necessarily interrupted, but simultaneously that some relation with the other is not necessarily impossible in an absolute sense, nevertheless, we might decide.

¹⁸⁸ Irigaray, Luce, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.56.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid: p.59, p.70, emphasis added.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid: p.44.

¹⁹¹ Ibid: p.92.

problematic nature of which Levinas would appear to have accepted, yet – surprisingly – Irigaray makes no reference to either theorist.¹⁹²

Derrida's approach to the 'threshold' of which Irigaray theorises is reflected in the first question of his text: 'I am addressing you, am I not?' As we have seen from the critique of Levinas, Derrida insists that the third party is always already 'there' even when a discourse appears to involve only two persons. Why, then, should this writer have asked the reader, at the outset of a book on the politics of friendship, whether they would deny ('...am I not?') that they are being addressed?

Perhaps the intention is merely to remind us of the detail of his critique of Levinasian ethics. Why, though, use a *question*? A statement, such as 'I am addressing you, but the third party is already present in my address and your response', would surely remind us of that critique more clearly. Careful readers of the late Derrida, however, will be aware that the element of *chance* – the 'perhaps' of which he is so fond – is crucial to his conception of the possibility of justice. Perhaps, then, the impossible

¹⁹² This is especially surprising since Irigaray's style of writing often recalls Derrida and, even more markedly, Levinas. Apart from Heidegger, whose theories are dismissed rather too briefly on p.124, Irigaray makes no references to other specific philosophers, though she often complains in general of 'the philosopher' who 'has not yet considered' the relations of which she writes, p.123. Though her writings on 'mutual listening', p.6, and 'reciprocal listening', p.125, make her work pertinent to the problems I am considering here, then, I would say that Derrida's willingness to discuss the most difficult of problems around relations with the other make his work the more rigorous option in support of my research here. For example, Irigaray's idea that 'a truly mutual gesture [can] only [occur] between two persons extraneous to a hierarchical relation', p.53, is incompatible with a founding conception of the work I want to do here, namely that power flows through any relation or relationship, as discussed in the introduction above.

reciprocation of required mutualism, of which Derrida begs permission to mention, is just what this question is intended to throw forth as possibility? Perhaps, in other words, the question is supposed to open an aporetic possibility of justice between friends, the ‘impossible’ thing which *Politics of Friendship* has often been read as an absolute denial of?

With fidelity to Derridean theory, any answer to this question must remain undecided if justice is to remain possible; for Derrida, in other words, there can be no law of justice, no just answer to the question ‘I am addressing you, am I not?’. We could recall, nevertheless, a statement already quoted above: ‘It is impossible to address only one person, only one man, only one woman’.¹⁹³ The statement upholds the critique of the earlier Levinas, doubtless. It also brings up the issue of gender which is an important element of *Politics of Friendship* in general and the ‘Recoils’ chapter, from which this quotation derives, in particular. What Derrida calls *the recoil* has critical significance for the point I want to make here, and especially so on account of its critique of fraternal/androcentric friendship.

Derrida’s ‘recoil version’ of the quote ‘O my friends, there is no friend’ is, he explains, ‘a thesis on the number of friends, on their suitable number, and not on the question of the existence of the friend in general’.¹⁹⁴ It involves ‘labour and the manoeuvre of recoiling’, it is ‘modest’ and ‘counts the coils’, it

¹⁹³ Derrida, *Politics*, p.215, emphasis retained.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid: p.209.

re-opens the question of multiplicity, the question of the one and that of the ‘more than one’ (of the one *qua* woman and the ‘more than one’, of the feminine one and the ‘more than one’ feminine one as well...). It thus explicates the grave question of arithmetical form which has been our obsession from the beginning: *how many friends – men and women friends?*¹⁹⁵

At this point, Derrida suggests that, as well as it being the case that ‘there is no friend’, singular, it may also be the case that one should not have too many.¹⁹⁶ In the light of this, he states that ‘one begins to have doubts about the canonical version’.¹⁹⁷ Though he does not explicitly link this dominant, ‘canonical’ version with masculinity in the ‘Recoils’ chapter, they are unambiguously linked earlier in the book:

I do not survive the friend... He bears my death... I say that using the *masculine gender* (the [male] friend, he, and so forth) – not in the narcissistic or fraternal violence of a distraction, but by way of announcing a question awaiting us, precisely the question of the brother, in the *canonical* – that is, *androcentric* – structure of friendship.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Ibid: p.209, emphasis added. Regarding Derrida’s description of the ‘recoil version’ of the ‘O my friends...’ statement as ‘*modest*’, we can note with interest Levinas’s statement that ‘The feminine is not accomplished as a *being [étant]* in a transcendence toward light, but in *modesty*’, *Time and the Other*, p.88, emphasis added to the last word.

¹⁹⁶ ‘Paraphrased: he who has too many has none’, *ibid*: p.209.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*: p.210.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid*: p.13, emphasis added.

It seems, then, that what Derrida calls the ‘recoil version’ of the ‘Oh my friends...’ statement is somewhat associated with the ‘feminine’ and is counterpoised against the ‘canonical [androcentric] version’. Derrida’s unambiguous subsequent declaration that ‘*canonical* or *recoil*, both versions speak to the infinite in the “none”, the becoming “not one” of someone of either gender’ should give us pause for thought, however.¹⁹⁹ It seems, here, that Derrida is suggesting that gender difference in the nature of friendship does not go all the way down, as we say. Instead, this recoil seems to involve a certain *stepping back* motion which I take to be more than hinted at in the quotes above, and elsewhere in *Politics of Friendship*. This recoil backwards is precisely consequent to the implicitly non-androcentric idea that one should not have too many friends. The recoil, it seems then, is a move away from wanting to increase numerically, away from the desire for universal fraternity. On the contrary, Derrida seems to promote something of a micro-demographic:

Among all the questions of number that should attract an essay on the politics of friendship, let us never give short shrift to what is called *demography*... How far beyond a certain number of citizens can a republic still claim to be a democracy? If this becomes problematic well before the canonical examples of Athens, Corsica, Geneva or Poland, if this begins with number itself, with the supplement of ‘one more’ [*plus un*, also ‘no more’], what will be said, beyond the billions, of a *universal* democratic model which, if it does not regulate a *world State* or *super-State*, would still command an international law of European origin?²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Ibid: p.216.

²⁰⁰ Derrida, *Politics of*, p.101, non-parenthetic emphasis added.

‘What will be said..?’, Derrida asks. Based on what we have seen so far in this chapter, we can answer that little positive will be heard, regarding the Marxist universalist model, from a large number of contemporary philosophers in the post-structuralist *milieu*. It is interesting, though, that he notes here a ‘problematic’ which begins with *plus un* (one more/no more) and ‘with number itself’. It seems almost that Derrida is arguing for the enisled self-one which Miller reads of in his work; that he is problematising all demography here and thus, by implication, all democracy. Yet who, if they have read Derrida’s later texts, could make the mistake of thinking him less than favourable in his comments as to the value of democracy?

The key to understanding something of Derrida’s argument here, as is so often the case with him, is to bear in mind his insistence (already noted above) that ‘the impossible must be done’. Such declarations are not common in Derrida’s texts, but gain all the more weight when they do appear (which, more often than not, is in the various published conversational dialogues rather than in his prepared writings). The hint, in the extended quotation from Derrida regarding the quantity ‘beyond a certain number of citizens’ which might cause a republic to no longer be able to ‘claim to be a democracy’, can be interpreted to carry great significance. Derrida could be read here to be invoking just exactly the ‘recoil version’ which he links implicitly if not directly to the idea that *one should not have too many friends*. Perhaps, we might want to argue then, it is the recoil which, by stepping back from the *plus un*, gains some kind of paradoxical power to generate some (local instance of a) democratic value. In connection with this reading of (or deconstructive extension from, one might say) Derrida’s hint, I would draw the reader’s attention to a crucial emblematic phrase

which Derrida finds in the researches of Walter Benjamin: ‘*eine schwache messianische Kraft*’ (a *weak* messianic power).²⁰¹ Characteristically, Derrida wants to problematise every letter of this:

I am not sure I would define the messianicity I speak of as a power (it is, no less, a vulnerability or a kind of absolute powerlessness); but even if I did define it as a power, ... I would never say, in speaking of this ‘power’, that it is strong or weak, more or less strong or more or less weak.²⁰²

Elsewhere, Derrida has made it clear that by ‘weak’ he does not mean ‘liberal relativism [but rather] a certain disarming quality in relation to the other’.²⁰³ It is this relation to the other, this disarmed opening to what *has to* come, which Derrida would gesture at with his key concept of messianicity. What is crucial, and quite under-discussed by many of the Left-orientated critics of Derrida’s late political work, is the idea that this ‘weakness’ (of a sort) can bring a greater strength (of some kind):

In a great number of my texts you will find a discourse on weakness. A weakness that can transform itself into the greatest strength. But there is a moment of absolute weakness and disarmament... The occasion, the aleatory, ultimately means exposing ourselves to what we cannot appropriate: it is there, before us, without us – *there* is someone, something, that happens, that happens

²⁰¹ Derrida, *Ghostly*, p.254.

²⁰² Ibid: p.253-4. Derrida’s concept of ‘messianicity’ is not some simple return to religious faith but rather is a figure used in *Spectres of Marx* and elsewhere to conjure some idea of the ‘presence’ of the other in the self, also described in *Spectres* and elsewhere as a form of ‘hauntology’.

²⁰³ Derrida, *A Taste*, p.63.

to us, and that has no need of us to happen (to us)... The 'has to' says yes to the event: it is stronger than I am; it was there before me; the 'has to' is always the recognition of what is stronger than I am.²⁰⁴

Here, then, Derrida seems to emphasise a 'greatest strength' consequent to the absolute otherness of the other; a strength contingent upon an 'absolute weakness' amongst 'ourselves', in other words. This is not the kind of language one should expect from the militant Left. In the view of folk singer Pete Seeger, in 1955, for example, it is union with the other (and union against the Other other, one could say) which should be encouraged :

When the union's inspiration through the workers' blood shall run,
 there can be no power greater anywhere beneath the sun;
 yet *what force on earth is weaker than the feeble strength of one,*
*but the union makes us strong.*²⁰⁵

More recently, having said that, Seeger has perhaps shown something of a recoil when he sang in the late 1990s that:

Maybe the biggest change will come
 when we don't have to change much at all,
 when maniacs holler, 'grow, grow, grow!'

²⁰⁴ Derrida, *A Taste*, p.63.

²⁰⁵ Pete Seeger, 'Solidarity Forever', *If I Had a Hammer*, words written by I.W.W. leader Ralph Chaplin in 1915, tune from 'Battle Hymn of the Republic'.

we can *choose to stay small*.

The key word may be *little*,

we only have to change a little bit,

eat a little food, drink a little drink,

and only have to shit a little shit.²⁰⁶

Here, the emphasis seems to be more upon small changes ('a little bit') than upon what Stephen Duncombe calls (in contradistinction to the politics of the underground) 'politics with a big P', yet we should note that 'the biggest change' is still being promised. Perhaps this difference in the later Seeger's emphasis may be correlative to a general shift in much of the Left, where the class consciousness emphasised by Marx has been somewhat eclipsed by what we might call an ethical conception of politics and political empowerment; these lyrics and other lyrics and comments from Seeger certainly suggest a less doctrinaire approach.²⁰⁷ Marx's promise seems less

²⁰⁶ Seeger, Pete, 'Arrange and Re-arrange', *If I Had a Hammer*, composed c.1998.

²⁰⁷ Whilst at Harvard, Seeger joined the Young Communist League and his commitment to socialism is well-known and well-reflected in many of his songs from the 1950s and 1960s. By 2007, however, he was regretfully stating that he 'should have asked to see the Gulags in the USSR', quoted in Dunaway, David King, *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Random House, 2008), p.422. A few lines after quoting this, Dunaway suggests that Seeger's 'right-wing critics are arguing over a corpse. The Left culture they attack... has largely vanished'. It would certainly appear to be the case, then, that not only has Seeger's attitude shifted to at least some extent but also that, within the Left *milieu* around Seeger (and far beyond, it is fair to add), there is a belief that the socialist/communist/Marxist Left is weaker today than it was, say, forty years ago. Seeger's post-1960s activism, meanwhile, has been more focused upon environmentalism than the union halls, with environmental damage to the Hudson River being an issue to which he has devoted great attention in more recent decades. Though he still describes himself as a communist, therefore, it is fair to say that Seeger's political emphases have shifted with the times to at least some extent.

expectantly awaited today than it was fifty or more years ago, or at least to be less supported by a critical mass.²⁰⁸ A verse sung by Pete Seeger's mentor Woody Guthrie, however, can remind us that, at least at one time, a broadly Marxist tendency was very common in the folk movement:

Ever'body might be just one big soul,
 well it looks that a-way to me.
 Everywhere that you look, in the day or night,
 that's where I'm a-gonna be, Ma,
 that's where I'm a-gonna be.²⁰⁹

The song 'Tom Joad', from which this verse derives, tells the tale of 'Preacher Casey' and his defence of the 'hungry little kids' against a murderous deputy sheriff. Tom Joad befriends this friend of the poor called Casey, hitting the deputy over the head with the sheriff's own club and killing him. Subsequently Casey also gets killed, so Tom Joad runs to his mother offering the verse above as a quotation from his friend Preacher Casey. Coming from a Preacher, the verse certainly has a religious overtone. It also reflects Guthrie's well known Marxist/communist tendency. The mention of this universally present soul, for example, has a Marxist overtone on account of the subsequent promise that it will be present 'wherever people are fighting for their rights, wherever people ain't free'. The fact that is a *possible* universality, in the sense that it is something which 'ever'body *might* be', also presents a somewhat aporetic

²⁰⁸ Even committed Marxist Eric Hobsbawm, for example, acknowledges 'the decline of Marxist parties and movements in many parts of the world' over recent decades, introduction to Marx, Karl, Engels, Friedrich, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London: Verso, 1998), p.10.

²⁰⁹ Woody Guthrie, 'Tom Joad', *Pastures of Plenty*, Prism Leisure Corporation, PLATCD 427, 1996.

demand for judgement, a Derridean could note. Overall, the mention of ‘one big soul’ is a fairly firm invocation of the Marxist desire for universal transformation, it is fair to infer.

Left-leaning folk music, then, would seem to have only a limited amount in common with the recoil concept, at least in the heyday of the post-war tradition, and would seem to offer little support for Derrida’s promotion of the idea of a ‘weakness that can transform itself into the greatest strength’. Its greatest affiliation has been more often to traditional socialism and Marxism, though perhaps less so in recent years. What of the punk underground? Is it happy to remain weak, whilst maintaining a belief that this weakness will spread to gain a certain kind of strength?

The case studies of chapter three and four are in large part designed to address this question. We will see that punk bands and punk-orientated bands often *have* shown something of a recoil, a counting of the coils we might say after Derrida. This has been attempted, for example, through a step back from trying to increase record sales, a refusal to play larger and larger venues, a desire not to ‘get big’ (Fugazi is the most famous example of an underground band which would resist fame, but there are many others). We will also see, that said, that others within the scene *have* wished for maximal sales, maximal audiences and so on (in the words of influential US punk group Mission of Burma, ‘fame and fortune is a stupid game and fame, and fame and fortune is the game I play’²¹⁰). In the case of the mid-1980s cutie scene, specifically, we will see that a desire for maximal ‘success’ was more common, leading to the rise

²¹⁰ Mission of Burma, ‘Fame and Fortune’, *Signals, Calls and Marches*, Ace of Hearts, RCD 10339, 1981.

of the ‘mainstream indie’ bands of the 1990s (the oxymoronic nature of the couplet in quotations will be discussed in the following chapter). Overall, aside from the cutie scene, however, we will see that the punk underground has often stepped back not only from the perceived mainstream but also from the dominant trends within its own movement; regularly, that is, a new-sense has recoiled from certain (musically and socially) established practices.

I name the ‘moment’ when a new-sense brings a recoil as the *micromatic* site on the grounds that its ‘borders’ are necessarily limited and ‘inward’-looking. The micromatic event, in other words, if there is such a thing, involves a stepping back/away from what is familiar/established.²¹¹ It does not *have to* arrive, necessarily; it may be the case that whatever arrives is necessarily ‘new’, but the feeling of a new-sense does not necessarily have to arrive. It has to arrive if and only if all the (other) agents within it make it arrive (hence it looks inward, to those others already in the moment).²¹² Strictly speaking, the micromatic event, as I conceive it, cannot occur with fewer agents than just that number which are ‘present’ as it arrives.

²¹¹ There are many correlations between what I call the micromatic event and Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of micropolitics. For example, the latter corresponds to my formulation in that, according to Todd May, ‘Micropolitics is not [just] an issue of the small... It is an issue of *machines*’, *Gilles Deleuze*, p.127, emphasis added. May goes on to state that, for Deleuze, ‘to think *machinically*... is to seek not for the eternal nature of traditional political entities: the nation, the state, the people, the economy. It is instead to seek for what escapes them’, *ibid*: pp.127-8, emphasis added. If May is correct, the correlation here should be clear: the micromatic event and Deleuze and Guattari’s ‘micropolitics’ conceived of as movements away from the familiar, the established, the traditional; movements, in other words, toward what I call the new-sense.

²¹² It may be here that my conception of the micromatic moment (formulated without familiarity with the work of Deleuze, it is perhaps worth adding) remains distinct from Deleuze and Guattari’s concept

The words ‘moment’ and ‘present’ need quotation marks here because – even though we might talk of certain periods/instances in the traditions of punk as micromatic events in which a new-sense *perhaps* has arrived (as I shall do in chapters three and four) – there is no present moment as such. In these *felt* moments, in other words, all periodisation (such as the association of anarcho-punk and the cutie scene with the 1980s and of riot grrrl and math rock with the 1990s) will be shown to have blurred boundaries, with elements from anterior traces and development of posterior significances always in play. These anterior and posterior connections mean that the feeling of a present micromatic event can only occur for a moment, if it can appear at all.²¹³ The moment passes, perhaps, when the feeling of new-ness ossifies and thus is no longer quite the new-sense it was. This moment has no real presence, in other words: being ‘present’ in the ‘moment’ might involve listening to a record just as much as, for example, being in a room with a performing group of musicians; in any case, we are talking here of a presence not necessarily contingent upon literal proximity, and a moment which is constitutively inexact, which can never be brought into clear view nor have its seconds, minutes, hours or days counted.

of micropolitics. For Deleuze, according to Williams, ‘The genuinely new cannot be recognised’, *Encounters*, p.116. Elsewhere, we can note with interest Williams’ mention, on behalf of Deleuze, of ‘the occurrence of new sensations’, *ibid*: p.105. If this occurrence is similar to my concept of the new-sense, the idea that these new sensations would be ‘defying identification’, by contrast, is not: on the contrary, I want to argue precisely that the new-sense *engenders* identification and recognition between individuals in some moment; or, better, that perhaps it can.

²¹³ In sympathy with Irigaray, then, I want to consider the possibility of a ‘fleeting moment’ (see above) of mutuality. In simultaneous sympathy with the theories of Derrida, however, I would like to insist that this possibility remain aporetic, hence the ‘if’ within the statement above.

Though a micromatic moment seems, therefore, to have to be chronologically imprecise and, strictly speaking, spatially infinite, it will nevertheless remain valuable in the following chapters to consider chronographic and geographic details; the year or month some specific record was released or some gig was performed, or the place where the recording/performance occurred, for example. These details are valuable because they allow a gesture towards a spatial/temporal 'location' where the new-sense *may* have been felt to have arrived in the punk underground. Exhaustive interviews with individuals who were 'there' could never allow us to point directly at the micromatic event, for it is not there anymore and perhaps never was. By discussing particular recordings, by quoting from the zines and other written materials of the scenes themselves, and by critically engaging with existing research into the new-sense punk sub-cultures I discuss, however, we may be able to gain some sense of what may have been felt to have arrived.

The micromatic event, if such a thing has ever been, is always already disappearing, then; we might even say that it is impossible although we should quickly recall that, for Derrida, the possibility of an arrival of the impossible is always worth considering. Any justice the micromatic event has contained, if such a thing can have arrived, would necessarily be betrayed by desires for 'more friends'. Even the nostalgic, furthermore, who believes he was 'there' at the origin(-ary repetition) is effectively a supplementary friend to his former self (nostalgia being constitutively different from experience, thus the nostalgic self being constitutively different from the self which experienced the 'original' moment). We will see that, in practice, the punk underground has had moments where some apparently new micro-scene seems to

have been felt to have arrived. It will also be shown that, as it progresses, a new-sense underground punk scene tends to either follow the anarchistic ‘no leaders’ ideal into a micromatic recoil without end (thus the scene effectively becomes non-functioning) or to push for numerical enlargement (thus forgetting the micromatic quality of the earlier new-sense moment, but enabling mass influence for the seemingly new scene; a mass influence which is constitutively a betrayal of a certain ideal supposed to be central to this underground, however).

Barry Shank has hinted at this paradox in his discussion of a simultaneous appearance *and* disappearance of felt-unity in a ‘scene’. *Dissonant Identities*, Shank’s study of *The Rock’n’Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (as flagged in the book’s sub-title), focuses heavily on the town’s punk scene throughout.²¹⁴ For Shank, ‘the specific desires of other participants [in a rock’n’roll scene] as well as the historically and discursively sedimented residue of past participants do not form discrete objects of identification but instead function as structures of possibility, *always receding before each member’s reach*’.²¹⁵ To emphasise his point, Shank quotes from Maki (a ‘fan’ whom he reveals had ‘self-identified’ as a ‘member of the scene’): ‘We always felt like we were *going towards* this on big happy tormented family, but *we never got there*’.²¹⁶

I would argue that such is the appearance of the micromatic event, as I conceive of it: a moment in which something like Derridean justice has arrived, perhaps. Even with

²¹⁴ Shank, Barry, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock’n’Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover: Wesleyan, 1994). Punk is Shank’s most consistent touchstone in the book.

²¹⁵ *Ibid*: p.131, emphasis added.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*: p.131, emphasis added, p.268, note 21 for Maki’s quoted proclamation of scene membership.

the ‘perhaps’, however, this is more than Derrida would have said about the possibility of justice having already arrived, it is fair to presume. (A good cross reference for the presentation of Derrida I have made here would be his late work on *hospitality*, where he argues that true hospitality involves a certain ‘irreciprocity’ with the ‘*arrivant*’; sadly there is no room to go in to detail about this here, however.²¹⁷) Nevertheless, I have offered detail of Derrida’s researches into justice because I believe that an optimistic reading of his late work provides theoretical groundings for the term I have offered above. In coining my own term – micromatic – I beg permission to make concrete applications of something like a Derridean perspective,

²¹⁷ For more detail on Derrida’s theories of hospitality, see Naas, Michael, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham, 2008). In short, Naas argues that Derrida counterpoises ‘conditional hospitality’ (which might allow some reciprocity) against ‘unconditional hospitality’ (which has to be ‘irreciprocal’), p.24. Only the latter can be true hospitality, for only in that case is the *arrivant* welcomed regardless of ‘any exchange’, regardless of the risk that we may subsequently need ‘to question our right to what we call “our home”’, p.22. ‘The absolute *arrivant* does not yet have a name or an identity’, Derrida declares, p.23. This being the case, the punk underground’s predisposition towards mutual solidarity (as reflected in the popular underground maxim ‘Up the punx!’) lacks genuine hospitality in the Derridean sense. Indeed, in principle, ‘each experience of hospitality must invent a new language’, Derrida has proclaimed, quoted on p.26. This being the case, hospitality can never be said retrospectively to have arrived, for the necessary component of *risk* can only be in the future (hence the requirement for ‘new language’, or for what I call new-sense: the *arrivant* has to bring unfamiliarity in order to bring risk). Retrospectively, the *arrivant* no longer brings risk, whereas prospectively there is a need for unconditional hospitality because there is risk. This theory significantly ‘maps on’ to Derrida’s theory of justice, for both require aporia (though justice can be conditional whereas ‘genuine’ hospitality cannot) and both can only exist in a prospective future ‘*à venir*’ rather than in any retrospective case. Justice and hospitality cannot be identified in the past, therefore, according to Derrida’s argument.

despite the French philosopher's well-known reluctance to apply the term justice in, for example, any definite way for any present situation.

Section Summary

Derrida's work has been argued as being available for negative or positive interpretation, as is demonstrated by Millers' and Howells's readings respectively. The key to making a more positive reading of Derrida would appear to require that we keep in mind his insistence that 'the impossible must be done'. Critchley's canonical reading of Derrida insists upon an 'impasse of the political' which, he argues, is overcome by the ethical theories of Levinas but not by Derrida. Latterly, that said, Critchley has declared himself 'more positive' about the political utility of Derrida's work. For Beardsley, meanwhile, 'there can be no politics of deconstruction' yet the aporetic openings from Derrida's theory of 'originary repetition' can have a certain efficacy for 'decision-making' and for the production of a 'lesser violence'. Beardsley implies a tension between deconstruction and Marxism which has been explored more explicitly both by Derrida's own subsequent writings as well as by later secondary readings which, in several cases, have suggested a degree of relevance in Derrida's late work for what is often called 'the anti-globalisation movement'. The key to this tension would seem to revolve around Derrida's conception of justice which, if it is possible, requires a necessary 'asymmetry' between the self and the other. Drawing on Derrida's concept of the 'recoil' and his Benjamin-inspired writings on a certain 'weak messianic power', I have offered a conception of what I call micromatic 'relationality'. In order to retain some sense of the fact that, for Derrida, the last word is problematic, we might say that the micromatic moment is impossible. For Derrida,

that said, the impossible remains worth talking about, evidently. We might say, therefore, that the micromatic moment – if it can appear – is always already disappearing. This momentary appearance/disappearance is hinted at in Shank's punk-related research.

iv. Conclusion

Discourses in and around the punk movement, including its underground sub-culture, often state or imply that, in order to be saying anything, one has to be saying something *new*. With good reason, indeed, punk has been described as something of a modernist movement (or, for others, post-modernist). From a Derridean perspective, this is problematic because the process of originary repetition means that, on the one hand, all repetitions involve something supplementary to the earlier trace whilst, on the other hand, no pure originary trace exists. This means that folk art, for example, is always already new in a certain sense. At the same time, it also means that punk's modernist tendency has to fail since no perfect novelty can ever be separate from all traces.

That given, I have coined the term new-sense as a short-hand for the *feeling* of newness which modernist and 'radical' art (such as that found in the traditions of punk) seems to have been able to kindle. It is not a denial of the principle of originary repetition; rather, 'new-sense' is a term which allows us to distinguish between that which is strictly new in the sense necessary to Derrida's theory (which I call the necessarily new) and that which *feels* new in a strong sense. It is a feeling the reader will surely recognise: the first glimpse of the collapsing Twin Towers in September 2001, say, or the first sight of a person with green hair standing at a village bus stop in 1977, perhaps; a moment of surprise or apparent 'disjuncture', in other words.

The new-sense does not necessarily have to point in a 'micromatic' direction, to use a second key term I have deployed in this chapter. It is clear, for example, that the Twin

Towers event felt new but had macro-social significance. Even in this case, that said, the new-sense brought by such an extraordinary event will doubtless have resulted in many collective ‘moments’ of aporia (demanding questions such as ‘what do you think brought this about?’, say, or ‘who could have done this terrible thing?’) in various micro-social instances around the world. These micro-social responses, perhaps, will have momentarily been micromatic events, then; if so, however, with fidelity to the arguments I have postulated above, we must add that we cannot know them, retrospectively, to have been just such a thing.

In the post-war years, and increasingly since the 1960s it seems, Marxism has often been considered to be neither new nor interesting to the greater mass of people in the UK and elsewhere. On the Left, anarchistic tendencies have become increasingly strong, with many continental/post-structuralist philosophers seeming to have tended in this direction through their problematisations of the universalising element of Marx’s theory of class consciousness. This insistence upon universal transformation has been criticised many times before, however, certainly including the period of Marx’s own lifetime. If Starr is right that there is a degree of ‘kettle logic’ in the *contretemps* between Marx and Bakunin (see above), it is also true that an antipathy between Marxists and anarchists has remained common in the many years since. Nevertheless, for a long time in Europe at least, Marxism was the dominant ideology of the Left. Why, then, did the Marxist strategy dwindle and fade from the 1960s onwards?

It is not the place of the present thesis to attempt some exhaustive answer to this question.²¹⁸ It seems fair, within our limited scope, however, to say that the lack of a new-sense may have contributed significantly to this decline. When punks wore swastikas in the mid-1970s and called for anarchy in the UK, it was felt to be a very new thing. Certainly it was no pure origin. Nevertheless, the impact of this new-sense is well known. Since the 1970s, traditions of punk have brought forth various subsequent new-sense micro-scenes. Many of these have encouraged a certain degree of political agency, but few have been socialistic let alone Marxist; on the contrary, an explicitly anarchistic orientation has been the dominant tendency.

We should bear in mind the standard Marxian critique of the anarchist, here.

Consider, for example, Antonio Gramsci's declaration in his 'Address to the Anarchists' that 'to rely solely on the creative capacity of [the] masses and not work systematically to organise a great army... is complete and utter betrayal of the working class'.²¹⁹ The address was designed to promote solidarity amongst the Left at a time when Mussolini's Blackshirts were on the rise, and probably for this reason

²¹⁸ For one well-informed answer to this question, see Leszek Kolakowski's epilogue to the third volume of his *Main Currents of Marxism: 3. The Breakdown*, translated by Falla, P. S. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp.523-531. In keeping with the standard view, Kolakowski cites the 1956 Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as the pivotal moment in the decline of post-war Marxism. He further declares, after three lengthy volumes of extraordinarily detailed engagement with different eras of Marxist thought, that (by his time of writing, in the late 1970s) 'Marxism has been frozen and immobilized for decades as the ideological superstructure of a totalitarian political movement, and in consequence has lost touch with intellectual development and social realities', p.529.

²¹⁹ Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p.189.

makes some concession to an ‘absolute truth’ in the anarchist idea. Gramsci goes on, that said, to complain that ‘that absolute truth is not enough to draw the masses into action’.²²⁰ His point, of course, is that emancipation requires a leadership to draw the class into success. The anarchists’ complaint against this, for the last 150 years or so, has been to insist that this leadership, *as* a leadership, will lead only to further enslavement.

There is no need for us to rehearse certain historical facts here, nor to defend against any complaints of ‘totalitarian perversion’ by noting, for example, that Marx never encouraged attempts for ‘socialism in one country’. It will be valuable, however, for us to re-consider Duncombe’s complaint that the underground renders itself impotent by refusing to militate within (rather than against) the mainstream culture.²²¹ The argument is powerful. If the micromatic tendency within the underground encourages some possibility of something like justice, precisely by recoiling away from numerical enlargement, perhaps this legitimises some talk of a lesser violence (Beardsworth); what, however, the universal non-violence implied by Marx’s promise? How are we to militate for this engaging with the mainstream culture?

Beardsworth, essentially in keeping with Derrida, cannot speak of a non-violence.

This is because the Derridean insistence that writing is violence (given the Derridean

²²⁰ Ibid: p.185

²²¹ Duncombe’s principal complaint is that the zine/punk underground wants to (impossibly) side-step the mainstream, positioning itself against ‘them’ (average, conformist citizens as well as ‘captains of industry’, essentially) but never seeming willing to engage with or transform the lives of this supposed mainstream ‘them’. He also rightly notes that this underground rarely moves beyond the rhetorical level, making no secret of his disappointment with regard to this.

sense of ‘writing’; any ‘inscription’ or ‘mark’, that is) presupposes that violence is always already involved in any discourse of any type. The anarchist dream (and certainly the punk dream), however, would often seem to be very much of a spreading of leader-less (mutual) empowerment which, ultimately, would be everywhere. As Duncombe complains, anarchistic punks will often talk as though this will simply occur naturally, as a product of people ‘being true to yourself’. The problem, a Marxist might quite reasonably point out, is that CEOs of multi-national corporations tend not to lose sleep at night in fear of a population of punks being ‘true to themselves’. This is because, pragmatically, the CEO knows that there will always be plenty of non-punks to sell to. Being punk, indeed, is constitutively to be in a minority, at least from the underground perspective: *count me out*, for example, could be a punk maxim. Such a recoil away from the (perceived) mainstream community could be argued to maintain elements of Derridean theory, nevertheless: if the punk’s step back from stepping in line raises an *aporetic* question, this aporia could, perhaps, result in a lesser violence.²²²

Having said that, is a ‘lesser violence’ enough? For the likes of Gramsci, certainly not, it would seem fair to say: a programme so limited would betray the proletarian class rather than leading it towards its own emancipation. For many anarchists,

²²² An important cross reference for this, though again there is not space here to go into more detail, is Naas’s argument (based on Derrida’s theory of ‘autoimmunity’) that ‘there can be no community without autoimmunity, no protection of the safe and sound without a perilous opening of borders’, *Derrida*, p.131. It is perhaps the case, if Naas is right, that Derrida would insist that – even simply for its *own* survival – the punk community would have to open its borders even to a perilous (unconditionally hospitable) extent to avoid the self-destructive violence (*suicide*, that is) of auto-immune constitution.

though, even just a glimpse of a lesser violence should be valued highly and as far as possible encouraged. (McKay suggests that we ‘*celebrate the spark of transgression* [correlative, I would argue, to celebrating what I call the new-sense], see in its spreading flash the ongoing possibility [of revolution], even see with its spreading flash’.²²³) Beardsworth suggests that aporias of time and of law are the pre-conditions for this lesser violence. Anarchistic questions, such as the idea that ‘anyone can do it’ (which I read as a question, or a possibility, rather than a statement of existing fact), can perhaps encourage aporetic conditions; and to that extent, anarchistic efforts can perhaps encourage a lesser violence. Even if this is not ‘enough’, it would be something preferable, presumably, to the *greater* violence which Beardsworth’s adjective implies to exist. I consider that underground punk’s new-sense moments have repeatedly brought a chance for a lesser violence in to view, even if only for a ‘vanishing moment’ (Marx; see introduction above). This aspect of the tradition is at least worth detailing, enquiring as to the political value of its mode of empowerment. I begin with a fairly clear example of ordinary repetition, the ‘original’ punk explosion which happened in the UK around 1976-7.

²²³ McKay, *Senseless*, p.9, emphasis retained. McKay’s implication here seems to be, against Duncombe, that the ‘ongoing possibility’ might ‘spread’ its ‘flash’ much more widely, might allow us to see indeed a transgression which could go all the way out, perhaps. It is worth noting, that said, that he quickly brings himself in to check: ‘The trouble with writing about things New Age is you get infected with its rhetoric’, *ibid.* Whether this infection could become epidemic, and whether this would be a good or a bad thing, remains left unsaid by McKay; it is probably the most critical question for anarchists who would dream of some non-Marxist universal transformation, however, and would be the only possible serious riposte to the well-founded complaints of Duncombe.

Chapter Three: The Beginning of a Continuation

Punk has valued novelty and has had a certain anarchistic orientation in its political persuasion. This has been partly manifested through its operational tendency towards a degree of independence from the mainstream. This operational tendency is supposed to produce a situation where ‘anyone can do it’. When some anyone does it, the strong sense of novelty felt by those who are ‘present’ in this ‘moment’ can be described as a new-sense. All ‘events’ are ‘new’, at least in the Derridean sense of these words – instances of originary repetition – but the new-sense differs from the necessarily new event because unfamiliarity is strongly felt by those agents who are part of the event. Without a new-sense, the event doesn’t feel new. In any case, all events carry traces from anterior events, which means that tradition in a certain sense is always present.

The punk underground tradition, as such, has carried certain elements forward over many years. Though the mid-to-late 1970s UK punk ‘explosion’ is often talked of as an entirely original event, we might better say that it brought a new-sense: it is clear that it had many roots in anterior traditions and events, as I show in this chapter (and as is suggested by the emergent anarchistic/post-Marxist tendency uncovered in the work of Bob Dylan from around ten years earlier, discussed in chapter one). The anarcho-punk tradition developed from this supposed-to-be-original punk scene, pushing forward a generally strong attempt at micromatic empowerment, to use the term coined in the last chapter. In the present chapter I very briefly discuss the early UK punk moment, examine at length the anarcho-punk scene which followed it (as well as the scene’s unravelling of the micromatic tendency) and, finally, I explore the distinct case of the cutie movement which followed later in the 1980s (and which

veered from the anarchistic, micromatic path though, initially at least, it is shown to have formed part of the underground punk tradition). Throughout the present chapter, as well as the one which follows, the principal concern is to uncover which aspects of each scene/moment were felt to have brought a new-sense and whereabouts a micromatic recoil may have arisen or may have been betrayed.

i. An Original Re-Birth?

The year is 1976 and punk is experiencing what we might describe as one of its original re-births. It is tea-time and a young man, in his late teens, is sitting amongst the three other members of his band in addition to a few other companions, in front of cameras which are transmitting 'live' to a regional mass audience. He is wearing a t-shirt with a pair of women's breasts printed in a rectangular frame at the appropriate height upon his chest. The interviewer is blatantly goading the youngsters, insisting that the band's vocalist should repeat the word 'shit'; his manner is that of a schoolmaster shaming a naughty boy. This interviewee attempts to steer away from the focus upon his swearword utterance, impatiently asking for the 'next question?'. He impatiently eyes his questioner, eyebrows raised to intensify his penetrating stare – a soon to be famous stare which is said to have been partly the result of eyesight damaged by severe and chronic childhood health problems.

The interviewer glances up to some girls, also teenagers, standing behind the group. 'And what about you girls... Shall we meet after the show?', he asks them, with the casual lewdness typical of the 'groovy seventies' (prior to the apparent eruption of punk of which the televisual moment I am referencing here is a critical moment).

Under the glare of the studio lights, something is rising in the young man in the breasts t-shirt; an anger perhaps, feasibly a sense of despair, but more likely a feeling of hatred. He was sexually abused himself, as a child, by a family member. He had a low-attendance record at school and spent time in institutions for juvenile delinquents.

He is a serial thief with a criminal record, and a sex addict. He has not been invited to speak on a television programme before and his band have yet to release a record.¹

He stirs in his seat. ‘You dirty old man’, he starts, with the clear indignation of the abused turning on an abuser. The interviewer eggs the young man on: ‘go on chief, you’ve still got five seconds’. The way he handles the incident will instantly and permanently end his career as a television presenter; he will later be said to have been drunk at the time.² The choice is clear. The young man could back down at this point, and defer to the institutional power represented by the interviewer. Instead, he ups the ante: ‘you dirty bastard’. He has just shocked a nation but the response of that macrocosm does not seem to concern him. With a wonderful mixture of calmness and contempt, he comments further to his friends: ‘what a fucking rotter’.³

This was not the beginning of punk: there was no such thing. The term punk had been applied to music before but, just as importantly, its etymology is said to include the denotation of a petty thief as well as, appropriately enough, being a name for a type of

¹ For more detail, see Savage, *England’s*.

² Hence the Television Personalities single, issued three years after this incident, where they crow at the presenter’s fall (‘Where’s Bill Grundy Now?’, 7" EP, Rough Trade, RT033, 1979).

³ This interview of the Sex Pistols by Bill Grundy has been repeated in many film and television documentaries about punk and the Sex Pistols. A good recent edit, with retrospective observations from fairly salient commentators cut in, was featured in the episode on punk in the BBC’s recent documentary series *The Seven Ages of Rock: 3. Blank Generation*, dir. Alastair Lawrence, BBC, 60 mins, 2007. For a written transcript, see Laing, *One Chord*, pp.35-6.

dried tree fungus used as tinder for ignition.⁴ Most dictionaries also state that the word can refer to a male prostitute.⁵ The Sex Pistols, the group which appeared in the television incident described above, included a thief (Steve Jones, the youth in the breasts t-shirt described above), a prostitute (Sid Vicious, widely reputed to have solicited himself to buy heroin) and a mouthpiece (John Lydon, aka Johnny Rotten) whose lyrical dicta were shocking enough to incite an extraordinary number of incendiary repercussions, as we shall see in this and the next chapter. This descriptor – punk – took these traces (thief, prostitute, tinder) and supplemented them. In that semantic supplementation (on-going, today, it should be added), the incident described above was a crucial moment: the re-birth of any instance in which a *verna* (the Roman word for ‘a native born slave’, and likely root of the word *vernacular*) turns to the master to say the word ‘no’. This re-birth of the subaltern facing imposed authority – Steve Jones’s televisual encounter with Bill Grundy – was an important supplementation of certain broad traces; a supplementation which added a new cultural connotation to the word punk as well as retaining elements of the older connotations.

Little more needs to be said here about the ‘first’ wave of (re-births of) punk. The Bill Grundy incident says it all, perhaps, and anything it doesn’t is probably already covered in the myriad of books scrutinising the details of the 1970s UK punk

⁴ The first printed reference to ‘punk rock’ may well have been from Dave Marsh in a May 1971 issue of US rock magazine *Creem*, in reference to a performance by ? and the Mysterions, Gorman, *In Their Own*, p.66.

⁵ Hence William Burrough’s famous comment, ‘I always thought a punk was somebody who takes it up the ass’ (source unknown, but the comment is regularly attributed to Burroughs). For more detail on the etymology of the words ‘punk’ and ‘punky’, see Laing, *One Chord*, pp.41-2.

explosion. But explosions have aftermaths, and this chapter is intended to note some of the key ones from the decade or so following the 1970s 'explosion' of punk. I begin with an examination of the 'anarcho-punk' movement, a politically-charged punk sub-culture which began around 1978 and peaked, in terms of influence and quantity of participants, in the early 1980s.

ii. There Is No Authority, But... : Anarcho-punk

There was a real sense of camaraderie about the scene... In that pre-internet age, a lot of people stayed in touch through the fanzine scene; you'd swap information and addresses in them, and people from all over the country would be getting in touch, saying what life was like for them in their neck of the woods. So, by 1981, things on the ultra hardcore scene had, for me, seen a '*re-birth*', as it were, of punk's original sensibilities, adapted and updated and streamlined for our generation. There was a sense that this was our time and we were glad to be active within it.⁶

So speaks an (ex-?) punk today, with a quarter century's hindsight. His wish, he says, is for his band 'to be remembered for being true to ourselves'. His verbal articulation of the DIY-punk ideal tidily sums up the motivation behind much of the underground scene in any moment of the 30 year period I am examining here:

Hopefully we provided interesting, enjoyable and thought-provoking material and maybe even inspired a few people along the way. If, on the basis of one person seeing/hearing us, it prompted them to go out and start their own band, fanzine, club, or whatever, then it was all worth it... I'm proud of what we did. [Being a punk] gave me a sense of 'Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do something, just do it yourself!' If you've got something you want to say... whatever the medium you choose – be it music, the written word, sculpture,

⁶ Steve Pegrum of early-1980s anarcho-punk group Kronstadt Uprising quoted in Glasper, *The Day*, pp.96-7, my emphasis.

whatever – just do it. You don't need to spend hours practising in your bedroom, and perhaps then end up never playing at all – just get out there and start playing straight away!⁷

Though this set of comments feels especially neat in its summation of key punk-underground ethics, similar rhetoric is presented consistently in Ian Glasper's *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho-Punk 1978-1984*. The book is a rigorously-researched 'a-z' of early 1980s anarcho-punk bands from which the above (and many following) comments derive. The dominant theme of the commentary (authorial, as well as the reported speech) is of empowerment in a microcosm: 'I always was, and always will be, a square peg that won't fit into any nice, convenient pigeonhole and that's what punk was about – a freak show for the freaks so they could freak everyone else out.'⁸ Even the more critical revisions Glasper features temper scepticism about the anarcho-punks themselves with a clear sense that, at least in socio-political terms, they were contributing to something important: 'anarcho-punk was a musically conservative and rather insignificant side show to the real assault on global capitalism... Crass clone bands... I wouldn't piss on them if they were on fire... [but] we do deserve credit for the political and social activities in which we participated.'⁹

Contrary-wise, Glasper's informants who are critical of anarcho-punk's political worth ('at the end of the day we weren't revolutionaries; we were just a bunch of

⁷ Pegrum again, *ibid*: p.100.

⁸ Kay Byatt of Youth in Asia quoted in *ibid*: p.164.

⁹ Andy Martin of the Apostles, quoted in *ibid*: pp.90-3.

confused children huddling together to keep warm’) are at least happy to praise the scene for its camaraderie (‘I loved that comradeship at the time, and I love the memory of it still’).¹⁰ All of the book’s interviewees seem to have at least something positive to say about the scene with over twenty years of hindsight, and most are voluble in their on-going enthusiasm for the sub-culture.

As with any felt trace, the substance of anarcho-punk is impossible to describe precisely. Certainly this music scene continued past the year 1984 delimited in the title (though not the content) of Glasper’s book, still existing in different but similar forms today in many parts of the world. The scene also has chronological roots anterior to 1978, certainly, with many of Glasper’s informants indicating an initialisation of motivation prior to punk’s supposed ‘year zero’ (1976 or, confusingly enough, 1977 by other accounts). David Bowie, a well known antecedent of early punk in general, for example, is frequently cited by Glasper’s informants as a crucial pre-punk influence. Wally Hope (about whom we shall learn more shortly) has also been argued as, effectively, a causative influence on anarcho-punk, though he died in 1975. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that anarcho-punk was at its height of renown, strength and importance in the six year period highlighted by the sub-title of *The Day the Country Died* and, furthermore, there is no doubt that it was a response to and continuation from punk’s first wave.

Anarcho-punk – to summarise drastically – was a politically-charged sub-culture which promoted vegetarianism, animal rights, peace (generally speaking – though

¹⁰ Joseph Porter of Zounds/the Mob/Blyth Power quoted in Glasper, p.216.

actual violence appears common from Glasper's account¹¹), confrontation of authority (to varying degrees, some of which will be described here) and, let us not forget, music. The latter cannot be profitably understood without reference to the other, more obviously 'political' concerns just mentioned, but in musical terms we can summarise anarcho-punk music to have been performed by small groups nearly always based around the classic rock line-up of bass, guitar, drums and voice, sometimes augmented with keyboards. The anarcho-punk groups nearly always performed rudimentary music comparable to, though often more dissonant than, many of the first wave punk bands. Musically, the higher tempi and more aggressively growled, shouted and/or screamed vocals mark the clearest difference between first wave punk and anarcho-punk. Lyrics concerned with war, violence, police, government – *the system*, to use the scene's own shorthand – are/were the norm. Glasper declares one particular band as

the beginning... reluctant leaders of an anarcho-punk movement that essentially eschewed all leadership [sic; Glasper himself is clearly conscious of the oxymoronic irony here as, he acknowledges, were the *reluctant* band themselves]... every single band in this book cites them as a major inspiration; they were a catalyst, no doubt about it, even if they defiantly refused to be figureheads.¹²

¹¹ For just one example amongst the many, Metro Youth give account of a 1979 self-organised gig. 'We arranged everything... including transport from the city centre for [20 pence, -ish] and a section of the audience who came trashed the hall, smashed up the toilets and then attacked one of us! That really marked the end of our belief that "all the punks" might actually be in it together and interested in the same things', p.228.

¹² Glasper, *The Day*, p.8.

The band in question were named Crass and, in direct contrast to the rest of the bands Glasper features, a wealth of ‘official’ (ie. non-fanzine/e-zine/etc.) literature about them is available.¹³ A potted history of Crass might be as follows. An ex-public school art teacher, real name Jerry (or ‘J.J.’) Ratter, the son of a senior military man, in his mid-twenties, finds a dilapidated estate (Dial House) with large gardens for a very low rent on the outskirts of Epping, late-1960s. He moves in, drops out of his job and opens the door in a ‘hippy’ gesture of communality: anyone can live there and there are no house-rules other than vegetarianism. In the early-1970s, a regular guest at the house is a young man named Phil Russell but better known as Wally Hope. Ratter assists Russell in the organisation and promotion of the first Stonehenge free festivals. Subsequently, the latter individual, according to Ratter’s account, suffers police harassment and incarceration by psychiatrists acting by proxy on behalf of the

¹³ As noted in chapter 1, McKay’s account in *Senseless Acts of Beauty* is a very useful scholarly account of Crass. Also worth looking at is George Berger’s *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus, 2006) despite the extraordinary number of punctuation errors. Ian Glasper’s twenty two page entry on Crass in *The Day the Country Died* is more succinct and in many ways superior to Berger’s account. Penny Rimbaud’s autobiography *Shibboleth* is a remarkably frank work with some philosophically interesting ruminations as well as many amusing anecdotes. For Rimbaud’s account of the death of Wally Hope, his fanzine *The Last of the Hippies* is well worth reading (Flowerpot Press, Epping, 1984). For more detail on the notorious prosecution under the Obscene Publications law of a record shop simply for stocking Crass records, see *Index on Censorship* 6, London, 1998, p.8 (p.148 for the offending lyrics printed in full). Such financially punitive measures against those who have publicised Crass may partly explain why the band are usually ignored in most mainstream histories of punk. Some have been bold enough to include them, nevertheless. Simon Reynolds gives them contextual references in *Rip It Up*, for example. More illuminating are the paragraphs on them in Savage’s *England’s Dreaming*, p.481. On-line material about and from Crass is plentiful.

state's secret services. Ratter has repeatedly implied that Wally Hope's death, shortly after his incarceration, was probably the consequence of a secret, murderous visit.

Whether or not one accepts this hypothesis, the tale Ratter tells of the 'fixing' of this wild hippy with a cocktail of psycho-active drugs makes disturbing reading. This being part of the official version of events, Ratter's horror at Hope's demise would certainly seem to have been brought about by more than simply a conspiracy theory.

Shortly after this, punk hits the headlines and Ratter re-defines himself as Penny Rimbaud, drummer with a punk band which, initially, numbers in its 'collective' only himself and vocalist Steve Ignorant (real surname Williams, a much younger man than Rimbaud with a strong predilection for David Bowie and the Clash).¹⁴ Extra members are quickly recruited from the milieu of the Dial House commune, including

¹⁴ Talking on a panel discussion of the legacy of punk (also featuring film-maker Don Letts, Penetration vocalist Pauline Murray and rock critic John Robb, Saturday 18th November, 2006), Penny Rimbaud seized the opportunity to repeatedly reject any suggestion that Crass were inspired by the Clash or had anything to do with mainstream punk. For example, John Robb's statement that '[punk] inspired a lot of people' was interrupted by Rimbaud's declamation 'I absolutely do not agree!'. I put it to Rimbaud during the question and answer session that, in fact, *some* degree of motivation from his personal response to early punk bands can be detected in *Shibboleth* (his autobiography). As I recall, his response was inconclusive. A similar line of reasoning/questioning was somewhat evaded by Rimbaud during our formal, recorded interview – 'those are, sort of, social explanations', he parried, in which he appeared to feel there was limited significance. It seems, therefore, that a belief in Crass as being disconnected at least from *mainstream* punk is consistent in Rimbaud's position. Strictly speaking, however, even the Crass drummer's acknowledgement that his band wanted to deny the Sex Pistols' claim that there was 'no future' proves the point that, through negation (denial), Crass was, to at least some extent, a consequence of punk. Steve Ignorant makes his love of the Clash in particular perfectly clear in Berger, *The Story*, 2006.

absolute beginners as well as more experienced players. Visual artist Gee Vaucher's contribution, designing the band's iconic artwork and creating several films to be shown at Crass's gigs, was non-aural but also crucial. The band's first live show, in the summer of 1977, was at a squat 'somewhere on the Tottenham Court Road' – an inauspicious start, apparently, because 'we [only] did three-and-a-half songs, before we got switched off by this retired colonel, who thoroughly objected to what we were saying' (the first of many attempts by authority figures to silence Crass, in fact).¹⁵ The band's early shows appear to have been fairly unsuccessful with the band seriously incapacitated through drink and, in this early stage, soft drugs. However, Crass became a more serious project in 1978, recording their debut LP with John Loder at Southern Studios the same year.¹⁶ This was the splenetic *Feeding of the 5000* mini-LP, featuring one of their most renowned right-to-shirk numbers 'Do They Owe Us a Living?' with its shouted answer 'course they fuckin' do'.

Feeding of the 5000, though originally issued by UK independent punk label Small Wonder, kick-started the band's own Crass records – the label Crass initiated in order

¹⁵ Glasper, *The Day*, p.14.

¹⁶ Loder, who died in 2006, was an individual of enormous importance to the international punk-underground movement. Aside from Crass (he had been friendly with Rimbaud since the latter had been performing with his hippy-band Exit in the pre-punk free-festival scene), Loder also recorded nearly all the releases by the other bands on the Crass record label – Poison Girls, Zounds, The Mob, Conflict, and so on. His critical financial relationship with the US Dischord label from the early 1980s onwards enabled the rise of groups such as the million-selling Fugazi (whose paternal economic support from Loder's Southern organisation played a key role in support of this band's much-discussed, determined independence) as well as lesser known groups such as Scream (though the latter's sometime drummer, Dave Grohl, would go on later to mega-fame with Nirvana and Foo Fighters).

to release its own and others' music, and which remains a benchmark for the punk underground by dint of its operational tendency towards economic independence and distinction from the mainstream. It also provided tinder for the anarcho-punk explosion overall, with its marching rhythms, peculiarly militaristic drum fills, dissonant guitar work and simple, angry, shouted words:

At school they give you shit
 drop you in a pit
 try and try and try to get out
 but you can't because they bash you down.

Perhaps this lyric is little more shocking than comparable sentiments found in, say, Madness's chirpy late-1970s smash-hit 'Baggy Trousers'. Many of those on *Feeding* certainly were, however.

'Fight War, Not Wars' and 'They've Got a Bomb', for example, outline the band's firmly 'anarcho-pacifist' viewpoint. Themes of masculinity and violence are prominent in tracks such as 'Securicor' (which lampoons the 'private in a private army' who 'walk[s] around with a big alsatian who'll re-arrange you with no provocation') and 'Women' ('fuck is women's money, we pay with our bodies... war is men's money, they pay with their bodies'). Perhaps most strongly, even in the cultural context of the decade which produced Monty Python's *Life of Brian*, Crass show an intense antipathy towards Christianity on tracks such as 'So What' ('So what if Jesus died on the cross? So what about the fucker? I don't give a toss!'). The latter concern comes through even more vehemently in the album's opening 'song' (it is

more like a freeform ‘soundscape’ of noise with spoken poetry on top, in fact), the notorious ‘Reality Asylum’. Also known as ‘Christ’s Reality Asylum’, this piece was offensive enough for the mastering engineers to refuse to cut the track for the first pressing (5,000 copies, hence the album title, though it has gone on to sell more than a hundred thousand) of *The Feeding of the 5000*.¹⁷ The band, in response, chose to leave one minute’s silence titled on the 12”’s label as ‘The Sound of Free Speech’. Interestingly enough for our purposes, several of the songs also heavily criticise the punk movement for its hypocrisy, insincerity and replication of rock’n’roll’s ‘same old game’.

Banned from the Roxy? OK!

I never much liked playing there anyway,
 said they only wanted well-behaved boys,
 do they think guitars and microphones are just fucking toys?
 Fuck ‘em, I’m gonna make my stand
 against what I feel is wrong with this land,
 they sit there on their over-fed arse,
 feeding off the sweat of [a] less-fortunate class:
 think they’ve got the power,
 got their fingers on the button,
 got control, won’t let it be forgotten,

¹⁷ Alan O’Connor reports Crass to have sold 20,000 copies of their second album *Stations of the Cross*, within two weeks of its release. Many report Crass to have sold a quarter million of individual albums with more than a million unit sales across their discography. By all accounts their sales history is extraordinary in relation to the indie sector at large.

the truth of their reality's the wrong end of a gun,
the proof of that is Belfast, that's no fucking fun...¹⁸

The Roxy was a key venue for first wave punk bands of the type denigrated by Crass; 'Banned from the Roxy' is a vengeful piece, accusing punk's 'power' brokers, perhaps rather unfairly, of being basically the same as the slaughterers of 'Mai Lai [and] Hiroshima, know what I mean?' The critique of mainstream punk comes through again on 'Punk is Dead', another of *Feeding's* ostensibly anti-commodity songs.¹⁹

Yes, that's right, punk is dead,
it's just another cheap product for the consumer's head...
CBS promote the Clash,
[but it] ain't for revolution, its just for cash,
punk became a fashion like hippie used to be
and it ain't got a thing to do with you or me...²⁰

¹⁸ Crass, 'Banned from the Roxy', *Feeding*. The Roxy was a key London venue for punk bands in the late 1970s.

¹⁹ The self-contradiction of the anarcho-punk critique of commodity punk, simultaneous with its own production of bourgeois commodities for a micro-market, is well critiqued in Stacy Thompson's *Punk Productions*.

²⁰ Crass, 'Punk is Dead', *Stations*. It is probably worth noting that an answer song was provided by the 'street-punk' group the Exploited in the form of the notorious 'Punk's Not Dead'. Anarcho-punk and street-punk were quite distinct movements in the late-1970s/early-'80s, particularly so after journalist Gary Bushell decided to present the 'Oi' punk-scene (of which he was, in effect, the figurehead) as antithetical to that of Crass. Bushell strongly denigrated Crass in *Sounds*, the rock weekly for which he wrote, whilst simultaneously promoting Oi bands whose recordings he was compiling on a series of

Before it had become a commodity ('fashion'), the song is implying, punk may have had something to do with 'you or me'. Penny Rimbaud and other members of Crass were old enough to remember what 'hippy used to be' before it became a fashion, as indeed were others in the 1970s punk mainstream punk scene such as Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren who had had some involvement with the anarchistic group King Mob in the very early 1970s.²¹ 'Punk is Dead' goes on to explain what it is that Crass want to do and how their punk would differ from what Crass perceive as the mainstream punk of the Sex Pistols et al:

Well, I'm tired of staring through shit-stained glass,
tired of staring up a superstar's arse:
'I've got an arse and crap and a brain,
I'm just waiting for fifteen minutes fame!'²²

The last two lines have been placed within quotes here because it seems to me certain that the Warholian reference is ironic. Indeed the song goes on to hope for resistance against the seduction of fame, asking 'can I resist the carrots that fame and fortune dangle?'²³ This is a classic example of the micromatic aspiration, and resist them

compilations. For their part, Crass lampooned Bushell and his rock-journalist colleague Tony Parsons (who, like Bushell, would go on to mainstream renown years later) in their hilarious critique 'Hurry Up Gary, the Parson's Farted' from their second LP, *Stations of the Crass*.

²¹ Savage, *Englands*.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. Crass printed full lyrics on each release, in a distinctive typewriter-composed style with a mass of forward-slash marks parsing the lines of the songs. Most of the lyrics I have printed here, however,

Crass did, existing for years to one side of the normal music industry (and, in their commune, of conventional society) in a microcosm they had played a critical role in creating.

Beyond the anarcho-punk microcosm, Crass also made several reasonably serious challenges to the macro-social political system. Mild examples of such include the fun-poking provision of a syrup-romance song 'Our Wedding' which the disguised Creative Recordings and Sound Services (C.R.A.S.S.) successfully pitched to teen-romance magazine *Loving* who then unwittingly offered the song to their readers on a free flexi-disc.²⁴ More significantly, Crass would speak out loudly against the Falklands conflict. This was done with a degree of secrecy perhaps natural to a moment of heightened feelings in the nation, with the 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands' flexi-disc being secretively slipped into the sleeve of other records handled by Crass's distributors.²⁵

were discerned from listening rather than reading, and my variations from the written text are deliberate (as is the case with the quote-marks above), since I have found that not all of their printed lyrics quite seem to tally with the words I believe I hear on the recordings.

²⁴ For more detail, see Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*, p. 130. 'When the hoax was exposed', Rimbaud claims, 'Fleet Street rocked, while heads at [*Loving*] rolled.' Even in this relatively light-hearted piece of counter-culturalism, then, Crass made some inroads to the heart of institutional power. 'Our Wedding' can be heard on Crass's third album, the female-fronted *Penis Envy* album (Crass Records, 321984-1, 1981). *Penis Envy* also features the notorious 'Bata Motel' which would eventually result in a successful charge by the state against Crass under the Obscene Publications Act, though the charge itself is ironic given that, as with *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, the message beneath the shocking language is actually quite to the contrary of the stated reasoning behind its censorship.

²⁵ Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands', flexi, Crass records, 121984/3F, 1983.

This was not the band's only directly provocative 'tactical response [to] Thatcher's desperate parody of a "victory parade": the 'How Does It Feel (to be the Mother of a Thousand Dead)?' single (another criticism of Britain's actions in the Falklands) was attacked by rock journalist Robin Eggar in the Daily Mirror. Subsequently, this journalist's brother, Tory MP Timothy Eggar, proposed to the UK's then attorney general that 'How Does It Feel...?' might deserve prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act.²⁶ A subsequent radio debate between the Conservative MP and members of Crass has been alleged to have worked to the latter's advantage, allowing them a public platform from which to state that they 'consider that Margaret Thatcher, her Government, Mr. Eggar and all others who support her are responsible for sending young men to be slaughtered, which, in my view, amounts to premeditated, calculated murder. Now, that is obscene.'²⁷ Shortly thereafter a Labour backbencher seized the opportunity to ask, during Prime Minister's question time in the House of Commons, whether Mrs. Thatcher might 'take time off this afternoon to listen to the record "How Does It Feel to be the Mother of a Thousand Dead"'.²⁸ Later the same week, Thatcher's press secretary stated that they had decided 'not to give these people [meaning Crass, Penny Rimbaud has reported] the dignity, so to speak, of having a public platform'.²⁹

²⁶ Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*, p.241. Crass, 'How Does it Feel to be the Mother of a Thousand Dead?', 7", Crass records, 221984/6, 1982.

²⁷ Ibid: p.242.

²⁸ Ibid: p.242.

²⁹ Ibid: p.243. Rimbaud goes on to claim that 'a memo was [subsequently] circulated within the Tory party advising that the record should now be ignored'.

Crass's most audacious stunt, in terms of confronting the states (plural, in this instance), was their production of what have become known as *The Thatchergate Tapes*. Using a tape splicer, the band created what appeared to be a phone-tapped conversation between Thatcher and Reagan wherein they discuss, amongst other significant issues, the sinking of the HMS Sheffield during the Falklands conflict. Crass had been tipped off by a disgruntled ex-sailor that the sinking of the Sheffield had been a decidedly underhand attempt to protect another boat with Prince Andrew on board. Anonymously sent to newspapers all over Europe and elsewhere, the tapes were widely attributed to the Soviets in periodicals from *The San Francisco Chronicle* to Britain's *Sunday Times* before a journalist from *The Observer* eventually managed to locate the actual culprits.³⁰ Consequently, Crass found themselves with a platform with which to transmit their rather unconventional views:

All of a sudden we were media stars. The telephone rang incessantly. We travelled here, there and everywhere to do interviews. We were grilled by the Russian press as American TV cameras recorded the event. We went out live on breakfast TV from Amsterdam to Tokyo, and gave 'exclusive' interviews to anyone foolish enough to allow us the air-space to give the anarchist view on world events.³¹

Yet Rimbaud states Crass to have *internally* generated a response to this media glare in the form of a critical self-question: 'We had suddenly been thrown into an arena in

³⁰ *Shibboleth*, pp.250-5.

³¹ *Ibid*: p.254.

which we were given a form of political power, and were being treated with a slightly awed respect. But was that what we'd set out to do all those years ago?'³²

He is referring to the band's early years when, as we saw above, they were prepared to paint the promoters of mainstream punk with the same brush as the slaughterers of Mai Lai and Hiroshima precisely because 'they've got the power'. Crass too had now gained some power and, as anarchists, this was a problem of the highest order, it seems. Yet, in some sense, this problem had always been at issue for Crass: though their critique of mainstream punk was popular amongst many thousands of fans who shared their disillusionment with a perceived failure to systematically encourage the possibility that 'anyone can do it', this very popularity had to undermine that critique. They were 'reluctant leaders', as Glasper rightly describes them (see above); and therein, of course, lies the rub.

Referring this problem back to the theories discussed in chapter two above, it should be clear that Crass's dilemma was a familiar one in terms of anarchistic attempts to seize power: as soon as they stepped into the political macro-sphere, the very justice which may have been felt by their co-agents in the anarcho-punk microcosm seemed, at least from Crass's point of view, to have evaporated. Such a problematic is easy to recognise in the group's later period, when the band became self-acknowledged 'media stars', yet arguably the issue arose from the moment the band picked up instruments and chose a name: a certain power was seized, and thus wielded, and thus perhaps enforced. Does it follow, then, that Crass's anarchistic critique of mainstream

³² Ibid: p.254.

punk was doomed to a failure in which they, as reluctant leaders, could only become the very thing which they had opposed?

I want to argue, at least, that such is not the whole story: Crass, after all, encouraged a certain recognition in a great number of others; a recognition of a certain latent power within (or between) themselves or, to put it in terms offered in chapter two above, Crass perhaps offered a new-sense of a possible justice through their micromatic recoil. I want to suggest, further, that elements of this encouragement of justice might be recognisable ‘in’ the recordings. I shall attempt now, therefore, to examine some of anarcho-punk’s musical materials in search of clues as to how questions of *power* and *tradition* manifest themselves therein. It makes sense to presume that the sonic contents of anarcho-punk – the music, that is – is a likely repository of such clues because, though so explicitly political and so arguably ‘unmusical’ on the surface, it is clearly the case that agency in punk consists in large part of people making and listening to music. Which anarcho-punk music harnesses the greatest power, then? Which breaks most firmly with traditions? What happens to the power of the music when a tradition is upheld or broken?

We can begin to address these questions by restricting ourselves to comparison of one Crass piece against another piece of the same period by Conflict. Both are fairly typical of the *oeuvre* of each band, and both are related yet each is distinct from the other in describable and significant ways.³³ For this task I have selected ‘End Result’,

³³ Initially, Crass had a somewhat paternalistic relationship with Conflict, it seems. Crass’s Steve Ignorant, who had guested with Conflict as an extra vocalist on an early release by the latter, would eventually go on to join as an extra member in the late 1980s. It is fair to say, indeed, that Conflict

the third song from Crass's 1978 *Feeding of the Five Thousand* mini-LP and, as something of a contrast, Conflict's 'Increase the Pressure' from their 1984 album of the same name.³⁴ What are the differences between these two songs?

Conflict were recognisably a supplement to a trace passed along by Crass.³⁵ Formed by four young men from 'in and around the notorious Cold Harbour estate' of Eltham, south-east London, around 1981, the band were notable, in the anarcho-punk context, for their rejection of the pacifist stance which Crass had so firmly encouraged.³⁶ Thus, after Colin Jerwood (lead vocalist and, it is reasonable to say, chief propagandist of Conflict) 'got to know [Crass], to be totally honest with ya, by kicking off with skinheads at their gigs!', a difference of approach/attitude became apparent:

were widely perceived as inheritors of Crass's (perceived) throne after the latter's demise, 'keepers of the flame' as it were (though Conflict's reluctance to be leaders is less rigorous than Crass's, it is worth noting).

³⁴ Crass, 'End Result', *Feeding*, 1978; Conflict, 'Increase the Pressure', *Increase the Pressure*, Mortarhate, MORT 6, 1984. In a sense these two pieces represent two distinct eras within the anarcho-punk scene. Early (pre-1980) anarcho-punk bands like the Mob, Zounds, Rubella Ballet and Poison Girls had a 'lighter' sound. This lightness was the product of fast tempi (often featuring strict quaver pulsation) with trebly guitars being 'scrubbed' (strummed fast whilst the fretting hand touches but does not depress the strings against the neck, thereby producing a 'chk-chk-chk' sound) and a stronger melodic sense. The later (early to mid 1980s onwards) anarcho- groups, on the other hand, tended towards a 'heavier', more 'metal'-orientated sound some particularities of which will be summarily described below. The latter, 'darker' sound was pioneered by groups such as Discharge, Icons of Filth and Anti-Sect.

³⁵ Glasper's first comment in his fifteen page entry on Conflict, for example, states that 'After Crass, when most people think of the anarcho-punk genre they immediately think of Conflict', *The Day*, pp.104-119: 104. The band have made no secret of the extent to which they were indebted to Crass.

³⁶ Glasper, *The Day*, p.104.

In the end, I think we were just this big pain in the arse for them, ‘coz, although they liked us being there, they kinda knew what was going to happen! And Steve used to pull me to one side and say, ‘Not tonight, eh?’ I’ve ended up in a few cells after Crass gigs with members of the band locked up as well, all stood there blaming me!³⁷

Conflict and Crass shared a certain solidarity, then, yet had contrasting approaches. I will say more about this later, but firstly offer some textual analysis of the Conflict work in question. The reader is encouraged to listen, before considering the following paragraphs, to tracks one and two on the CD provided.

Increase the Pressure.

‘Increase the Pressure’ begins with a small, anticipatory squeal from the guitar amp. The player then begins properly, as it were, with two notes (see example 1): E-flat above middle-C and the B-flat below it, plectrum-struck in a 12312312 rhythmic pattern which obviously undermines the comfort of a ‘square’ division of quarter beats (3 + 3 + 2 quavers adding up to four crotchets of course, but in a manner which recalls Afro-diasporic rhythms more than a straight rock four beat). This rolling rhythm is moved down a tone to D-flat and A-flat respectively, implying a I- \flat VII harmonic movement which, I contend, derives great significance from its felt uncertainty as regards a (western) sense of tonal centre. This second bar’s implication of a (third-less; that is, neither major nor minor) \flat VII chord is delivered with the

³⁷ Quoted in Glasper, *The Day*, p.105.

same rhythmic treatment: a 12312312 emphasis which provides our awareness of the commonly-felt structuring principle of the musical ‘bar’.



The guitarist’s plectrum, it is worth noting, sounds tightly held in a hand which is simultaneously dampening the strings in order to achieve a distinctly brittle, chopping sound from his amplifier which, most listeners could easily say, is turned to a ‘heavy metal’-sounding high (distortion-inducing) volume. Upon the arrival of the third bar, he adds F natural at the top of the previously-held interval of A-flat under D-flat, stating (as standard European music theory would have it) the chord D-flat major, second inversion. From these three bars, most listeners will, if centuries of music theory are to be believed, be awaiting a return to the ‘home’ which the opening interval seems to have implied. This implied home key would be E-flat according to the reading I have privileged thus far. Having said that, the sense of E-flat as home is ‘undercome’, so to speak, by the second bar’s combination of A-flat and D-flat. There is, then, harmonic uncertainty here for the competent listener (by which I mean the anarcho-punk ‘fan’, whose ears are arguably more competent in this context than, say, a classically-trained scholar, and perfectly capable of noticing the ambiguity to which I am referring here). The harmonic sequence seems to imply an E-flat-D-flat-D-flat-A-flat progression, making at least two ‘home’ notes feasible: E-flat or A-flat, though the former would be a modal sequence whilst the latter could be a conventional major key progression.

Four bars at the outset of an album which would sell many tens of thousands are four important bars. If the piece is in a modal E-flat key, the guitar player can be said to have begun with a third-less second inversion tonic E-flat chord, developing into a $I/\flat VII/\flat VII/IV$ progression. We must note, however, that at the fourth bar he adds a declaratively high A-flat to an open fifth (low A-flat and E-flat) which, at the very end of the four bar sequence, dips to G-natural. This note, G, is the major seventh of the open fifth A-flat chord the guitar player has already offered, of course. Its appearance, in the crucial closure of each four bars of this sixteen bar intro, raises the serious possibility that A-flat could actually be our 'home' note (the tonic): major seventh as leading note, if this piece of punk is obedient to conventional European harmonic rules. The clue is strong, yet harmonic uncertainty is still in the air, for modal harmonic progressions do not obey the same logic as the diatonic system. Will Conflict resolve our musically-felt uncertainty?

The aural conflict here is between E-flat and A-flat as possible tonic notes. The (modal) logic of a $I/\flat VII/\flat VII/IV$ progression would confirm the former. Yet the hanging chord – A-flat at the fundament, E-flat above it and a warbling, string-bent note shifting around G-natural – at the end of the sixteenth bar seems to imply A-flat as tonic.

To contextualise this ambiguity, it is perhaps worth noting that such modal harmonic structures are fairly common in late-twentieth century commercial popular music. The Kinks' 'You Really Got Me' and 'All Day and All of the Night' and the Who's 'My Generation', in particular, used prominent mixolydian $I-\flat VII$ structures, for example. Prior to this, modal harmonic structures were of course often found in folk

music. ‘What Shall We Do With The Drunken Sailor?’, for example, uses a strongly dorian I- \flat VII movement often referred to as the ‘double tonic’ (more on this shortly). If, however, A-flat were the tonic note of ‘Increase the Pressure’, this would reconfigure the progression so far as V/IV/IV/I, a major-key harmony which essentially reproduces a large part of the musical ‘good sense’ of institutional harmonic theory. As the intro’s last chord hangs uncertainly, with the string-bent roughly-G-natural note begging the question ‘where, harmonically-speaking, are we?’, a voice cries out:

never mind the bullshit, here’s the facts!

The voice is instantly familiar to the culturally-competent listener as that of the London working classes. This may be a dual reference: to the Sex Pistols’ first album (*Never Mind the Bollocks: Here’s the Sex Pistols*), on the one hand, but also, quite feasibly, to the avant-garde tendencies (‘the bullshit’) which Crass in particular had been developing during the period that *Conflict* will have composed this piece. In the aftermath of this cry, we are indeed now treated to what Theodor Adorno has called ‘the most primitive harmonic facts’: an I/V/IV/V harmony (unambiguously in A-flat major, now) which can be found in church hymns, classical symphonies and, of course, standardised blues, rock’n’roll, country music and so on.³⁸ It is also worth noting that, in rhythmic terms, the Afro-diasporic 3 + 3 + 2 pattern now gives way to a straight, military four beat.

³⁸ Adorno, ‘On Popular Music’ in Firth, Simon, Goodwin, Andrew, *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.301-314: 303.

It would be difficult to make too much of the significance of this rhythmically and harmonically familiar terrain. Conflict's song – at the *lyrical* level – is all about the power of certainty, of counter-hegemonic strength through solidarity. In keeping with this, the I/V/IV/V ('three chord trick') pattern is repeated for a standardised sixteen bars whilst the vocalist explains, with impressive honesty, that we are about to hear

the second album full of same old songs,
 fighting back against a system which is cruel and wrong,
 yet another battering ram against a wall of power
 a blasphemous attack to blow the leader's cover.

In musical terms, however, there is little that is blasphemous here beyond the volume levels – even these being nothing beyond that which had been established nearly two decades earlier by the likes of Townshend and Hendrix. Like folk musicians, Conflict care little that they are re-producing the 'same old songs' of their tradition because, as the lyrics point out, 'it's the same fucking system and it still stands strong'. The logic runs, therefore, that increased pressure is the only solution (as opposed to, say, changing the counter-hegemonic strategy). The music, in other words, is claimed not to be the message, here. The listener, furthermore, is encouraged not *only* to listen to the words. The call, rather, is for direct action of the physical kind:

It takes more than music, it takes more than words...
 Power must be tested, it's testing time.

At this point in the song, a different harmonic theme descends in a V/IV/iii/II pattern, with the relative minor of the sub-dominant (ii) actually being played as a B-flat *major* chord (II), thereby implying itself as the dominant of E-flat – E flat being, as the careful reader will recall, the possible-tonic which provided the harmonic uncertainty of the intro. This technical detail of harmonic functionality – B-flat major being the dominant of the dominant of the verse's tonic (A-flat), thus recalling the 'circle of fifths'-based structure so common to the popular songs of the era criticised by Adorno – is surprisingly in-keeping with long-held tradition. The overall movement of these chords seems inevitably bound back towards I, the tonic. It is also worth noting that, after the eight bars of instrumental performance of this middle section, the vocals are then delivered within a classic 'middle eight' periodic structure – at which point, as we might again anticipate if at all familiar with the tradition of popular song, the verse's chord pattern (tonic/dominant/sub-dominant/dominant) returns in force for sixteen more bars. Finally, a four bar coda allows the vocalist to thrice repeat the key instruction: 'fuck 'em up again!'

'Increase the Pressure' is not a song about finding a new-sense with which to outwit the authorities. It is not an adjustment of counter-hegemonic strategy, re-organised to fit the song's mid-1980s context in which Thatcher's 'hoards of police, army and fuck knows what else' (as referenced in the lyrics) were charging from the Right against the Left in a manner which can reasonably be described as radical. This song does not, in other words, aim to be a new root pushing into unfamiliar soil in a manner which might potentially confuse the enemy, or might offer some (potentially

micromatic) hail to others looking for fresh counter-hegemonic strategies.³⁹ If the Right-wing ethos of the day was radically new ('there is no such thing as society' and other Thatcherite maxims being reasonably so described), 'Increase the Pressure' proposes a simple solution: 'those who won't take no more of seeing the privileged profit from the poor' must show intensified strength and solidarity:

Well bollocks to them all, keep smashing at the wall,
pile the pressure on and Government will fall.

It is hard not to be at least a little impressed with such earnest, deeply-held conviction. Yet though Thatcher did fall from power, and though the animal rights movement (for which Conflict provided significant promotion) has had many successes in the intervening two decades since this song was issued, Conflict's optimism may not have been entirely well founded, if Glasper's informants are anything to go by.⁴⁰ Many of the ex-anarcho-punks interviewed in *The Day The Country Died* voice an opinion that the political situation is either as bad or worse now as it was then. To compare Conflict's level of musico-symbolic counter-cultural success with that of Crass, we must first try to develop a picture of what the latter, by contrast, may have been trying to do. I turn now, therefore, to the latter's 'End Result', which I will argue offers significant illumination of certain key differences between Crass and Conflict.

³⁹ As noted in chapter two, a new-sense does not necessarily have to result in a micromatic event, hence the possibility of a new-sense song is labelled here as being only *potentially* micromatic.

⁴⁰ The animal rights movement's successes include, indirectly and/or directly: the banning of fox hunting; the banning of breeding mink for fur coats; the 1999 closure of the Hillgrove Farm which had been breeding cats for vivisection purposes for many years; and such like.

End Result.

A bass guitar throbs out four fast-tempo crotchets on its lowest B-flat. This descends to A-flat for four more, switching bar by bar between the two. We could, of course, be about to hear a cover version of ‘My Generation’ judging from this I- \flat VII switch. We might also recall the opening (and only) bass riff from Joy Division’s two-note classic ‘Transmission’, which shares the same pitch relationship though with a slower tempo and with an allotment of two bars per note. Alternatively again, we might contextualise these two notes against Black Sabbath’s ‘Paranoid’, wherein the I- \flat VII harmonic structure can almost accommodate the singing-along of the melody from ‘What Shall We Do With the Drunken Sailor?’ (see above; the \flat III chord at the end of the ‘Paranoid’ riff actually causes a tonal/phrasal clash at the second arrival of the words ‘drunken sailor’, but aside from this the two songs ‘map on’ perfectly well). Whatever we make of this basic two-note intro, it is fair to say that it is not, in any clear sense, an enforcement of a pure harmonic I – in other words, it undermines the ‘subjective’ purity normally associated with the unimpeachable dominance, as it were, of the absolute tonic note in diatonic functionalism. We may be, to clarify further, a little thrown-off-centre by the arrival of the note A-flat in the second bar.

After a very short statement of this bass theme, drums crash in on a kick-snare ricochet which will proceed unabated throughout the song without fills and with only a constant hi-hat part (also in straight crotchets) for company, providing the militaristic ‘oom-cha-oom-cha’ so common to punk in general and early Crass in particular. Guitars buzz around in the background, adding some colour but, in notable contrast with Conflict, they are faded low in the mix, with the bass line providing the

principal sense of harmonic movement as the song develops. The result does not sound like a conventional rock record, as a result: though decidedly bombastic, it does not foreground a guitar hero of any stripe.

A voice comes in with a word delivered alone: 'I...'. The word, which is what I read the song as being about, coincides with the first upbeat after the customary eight bar intro so familiar after a century of music hall, rock, jazz and other forms of popular song (not to forget, of course, many of the nineteenth century German lieder of the art-music field). This singular word provides an important moment of interpellation, declaiming the subject for an audience's speculation: '...am a product', he goes on to reveal over the bass guitar's A-flat. 'I... am a symbol...', he proceeds further, the \flat VII bass-note again providing symbolic disruption of the discursively-singular 'I'. As the song turns to a I- \flat III-IV-V (modal) harmonic movement, he extends his description of the self-symbol '...of endless, hopeless, fruitless, aimless games'. 'I', in this song, is in a field of play, of symbolism, of 'games', in other words. This chord progression is delivered once, with a full bar for each chord, before a quick-changing (one chordal position per bar) I-IV structure develops. The harmonic movement, though 'familiar' (traditional-sounding) in feel – and diatonic if analysed in isolation from the rest of the song – is supplemented with a (modal, again) feeling of forward/upward motion by dint of the bass line travelling from the tonic B-flat up, via the notes of the pentatonic minor scale so beloved by blues-rock guitarists, to an octave above its fundamental.

The harmonic development is basically satisfying in a musical sense, yet – *precisely because of that* – it can be felt as somewhat pro-hegemonic, in a certain sense, and

thus somewhat contradictory, when used by a group which would claim to seek to undermine the hypocrisy of the rock'n'roll/mainstream punk orthodoxy; if, that is, we will still consider musical pleasure as being played out in a field of referentia which operate within power structures of hegemony.⁴¹

As the singer rants on that he is 'the dirt that everyone walks on... the orphan nobody wants... the leper nobody wants to touch... much...', the minor-pentatonic gesture towards blues-rock is inverted. In other words, the bass-line descends through the scale from the B-flat an octave *above* the one heard at the outset back down to its fundamental 'home', the deepest root of chord I available on a conventional bass guitar. Yet by the time Steve Ignorant belches out the word 'much' at the end of this first verse, we have returned to the \flat VII (A-flat) position. The re-appearance of this sub-tonic chord (\flat VII) at this particular juncture would seem to unbalance the idea that '*nobody* wants to touch' him, thus reminding us that in fact the problem is merely that nobody wants to touch him *much*. The harmony supports the lyric, here and elsewhere, precisely by unbalancing us, I would argue: identity, in this song, is uneasy, yet despite the decentred words and music, some sense can be found within.

⁴¹ For insight into the nature and function of hegemony within capitalist ideology, see Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971). It would be a mistake to suggest that all functional tonality is always necessarily hegemonic, since the (associative) counter-hegemonic potential of a major key tune such as 'The Red Flag' should be evident. If, however, Crass intended to go further away from the clichés of rock'n'roll music than other punk bands had, as seems certain, the harmonic conservatism identified above is notable for its failure to make much movement in such a direction.

The effect I am suggesting as being ‘present’ here, in case my explication so far has obscured it, is that the movement from I to \flat VII engenders a split personality within the harmonic fabric of this song and, indeed, of any song that uses the device: double-tonic as multiple-I, in other words.⁴² The beginning of the third verse drives this point home as the vocalist declares the word ‘I...’ again over the tonic I before stating ‘...am a subject’ over the \flat VII position. There is, the lyrical-harmonic structure of the song can be interpreted as saying, *no* pure subject, *no one* (no I, the tonic, no ‘I...’, the detached individual).

*Best Before 1984.*⁴³

It seems certain that the creators of ‘Increase the Pressure’, Conflict, would have had a high level of awareness that their introduction was more musically unusual (‘noodly’, ‘airy fairy’ and lacking in ‘bollocks’, they might well say) than the three chord trick of the main verse. I maintain, therefore, that my analysis here is based on

⁴² A cross reference for this proposition would be John Mowitt’s fascinating discussion of the rhythmic division-of-self which occurs in the backbeat of the interpellative hail of the Rolling Stones’ ‘Get Off of My Cloud’. Mowitt claims that ‘the repetition of “hey, hey, you, you” assumes the structure of a call-and-response pattern... an interpellative reiteration... [a] twin hailing [which] simulates a scrambled shifting between two interlocutors’ (*Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Durham and London: Duke, 2002), p.61).

⁴³ This was the title of Crass’s self-released retrospective compilation LP. It is fair to say that, under the influence of Orwell no doubt and in line with many cultural voices in the early years of Thatcherism, Crass appear to have been somewhat obsessed with the arrival of this date. Indeed, the catalogue numbers of their records were carefully arranged to count down to the dreaded year, hence the 1978 album *The Feeding of the 5000* having the catalogue number 621984 (six years to nineteen eighty four), 1979’s *Stations of the Crass* being 521984, and so on.

musical details of which the performers would have a high degree of consciousness, though they might be unfamiliar with much of the terminology I have employed.

What, then, can we conclude from the fact that both of these songs utilise discernibly modal harmonic schemes in conjunction with more standardised diatonic harmony?

Possibly such is the consequence of an experimentalism integral to punk's 'year zero' pretensions. Clearly Conflict, for example, were *able* to churn out a familiar I-IV-V pattern, yet allowed themselves at least a little room to experiment beyond such facile progressions – room which more experimental punk-orientated bands have made their principal domain but which Conflict quickly close up. Crass, by contrast, appear to have been more keen to offer a new-sense, as I have tried to show in the case of 'End Result'. It is worth noting, more generally, that they featured only two I-IV-V songs in their fairly large catalogue of albums and singles. One of these, 'I Ain't Thick, It's Just a Trick', almost acknowledges its own (three chord) trick structure in the title. The other, 'Big A, Little A', was deliberately placed on the B-side rather than the A-side of a single precisely because it was 'a little bit of a scorcher', Penny Rimbaud told me in our formal interview.⁴⁴

It seems to be the case, then, that Crass were, to a significant extent, *deliberately avoiding* certain capabilities they had for creating catchy, harmonically-familiar and appealing music (though not all such capabilities were avoided in 'End Result', as noted above). As the band went on, it became more and more experimental, with 1983's *Yes Sir, I Will* album adding a 'free jazz' dimension to the sound through a bleating saxophone and the large-scale abandonment of the song-like structural forms

⁴⁴ The a-side, 'Nagasaki Nightmare', is a significantly more unsettling piece (Crass, 429184/5, 1980).

which had made the earlier albums far easier to listen to for most audiences, including punk ones. The final LPs from Crass, *Ten Notes on a Summer's Day* and *Acts of Love*, are more like poetry albums with avant-garde noise for accompaniment. The movement away from musical familiarity appears to have been deliberate, at least for Rimbaud.

That was our whole artistic approach... whenever anyone accepts a piece of my work, I'm glad that's happened, but it gives me a license [sic] to push harder... to try and break down more cultural barriers... We [Crass] had gained this large following of people who appeared to appreciate our records and wanted to grow with us [but] we were very angry about the Falklands... so we did a piece of music [*Yes Sir, I Will*] that wouldn't allow people to have any fun of it.⁴⁵

Such an aspiration to avoid being 'accepted' constitutes something of the micromatic recoil as described in chapter two: a strength in the other ('anyone') is recognised in a certain sense ('I'm glad that's happened') but this link is not wished for as a permanent mark of solidarity; on the contrary, Crass in general and Rimbaud in particular seem to have always wanted to generate more questions, more problematisations, more aporetic (im)possibilities for justice, perhaps. Conflict, by contrast, do not seem to have concerned themselves with any need for encouragement of aporetic openings: they merely wanted to increase the pressure with a strong

⁴⁵ Quoted in Glasper, *The Day*, pp.26-7. In interview with me Rimbaud made reference to how much he likes the female musician he has been collaborating with in recent years because 'we don't know who each other are'. He also stated that, in the years after Crass, he very much enjoyed playing with 'jazzers' because 'they'd be doing their thing and I'd be doing mine and there was no communication' (author interview, Newcastle upon Tyne, 17th May 2007).

message. This is evident when one compares both the lyrics and the music of Crass's 'End Result' and Conflict's 'Increase the Pressure'. Both pieces show a certain harmonic ambiguity through the notable use of a 'double-tonic' structure, but where the former employs that technique throughout and accompanies the plurality with lyrics also about confused identity, the latter hints at musical complexity only to push it aside and go for what is reasonably describable as a populist lyrical and musical approach.

In terms of the punk microcosm, Conflict have shown some signs of wanting to enlarge it: in conversation with Ian Glasper, the band's vocalist Colin revealed that the band had considered an offer from EMI, and though they turned it down on the grounds that 'some people say it would be a demoralising slap in the face', he also notes that 'others say this shouldn't be a private fan club... *we should be getting heard and we're not*'.⁴⁶ The fact that the band turned down such a deal shows that they upheld the anti-major-label principle which anarcho-punk, probably more than any other sub-genre of punk, has promoted. To have even considered it, however, places them a long way from Crass, whose Penny Rimbaud remains committed to self-empowerment over and above group empowerment, even to the extent of querying the legitimacy of mutuality within an anarchistic syndicate:

On a political level, I think the whole idea of co-operatives and decentralisation, the whole syndicalism thing, is very sensible ground. But given the fact that we're living in an increasingly globalised world... it's a bit daft to say, 'Oh, let's base our model on these Catalanian syndicates!' Fuck me, we need to base

⁴⁶ Glasper, *The Day*, p.118, emphasis added.

the model on ourselves... until we're clean enough in ourselves... it won't work.⁴⁷

There is not room here to argue the logic or otherwise of Rimbaud's position on this matter. It is clear, in brief, that rather than attempting to increase the pressure, the instigator of the Crass commune has grown towards a political programme focused firmly upon pure self: 'back then, I was "just" asking questions about the government and the church, but now I'm deconstructing my own feelings'.⁴⁸ It should not be forgotten, however, that in its 'heroic' years, Crass made a serious encroachment into the wider socio-cultural and -political environment beyond punk's microcosm, as leading writer on punk Jon Savage has acknowledged:

Their *Feeding of the 5000* was the first of a sequence of media (records, slogans, books, posters, magazines, films, actions, concerts) so complex... and so effective that they sowed the ground for the return of serious anarchism and the popularity of CND in the early 1980s. It's also possible to trace the current popularity of the travelling lifestyle to Crass's huge success in the early eighties.⁴⁹

'Crass's huge success', that said, was also the failure of one of its central ambitions: 'There is no authority but yourself', perhaps their most significant slogan which clearly focuses upon pure self-empowerment rather than empowerment after an other

⁴⁷ Ibid: p.29.

⁴⁸ Ibid: p.29, quotes retained from original.

⁴⁹ Quoted in McKay, *Senseless*, p.75.

has ‘sowed the ground’. If Savage is correct that Crass’s seed truly led others to CND and anarchism, as certainly seems to be the case, then Crass’s *de facto* leadership would seem to undermine the band’s (or at the very least Penny Rimbaud’s) central value: lead yourself. Rimbaud’s autobiography *Shibboleth* suggests that he is perfectly aware of this problem.⁵⁰ Perhaps to complain of the contradiction is to miss the most important element of Crass, however: perhaps their politics of empowerment were/are at their most powerful, in a certain sense, just in the way that Crass frequently tried to recoil from leadership.

We might bear in mind, for example, the fact that every group quoted in Glasper’s account of anarcho-punk credits Crass as an influence yet, at the same time, it is clear that – after Crass – these groups felt able to say something of their own, to encourage others to resist, to become politicised. George McKay has hinted at just a thing, suggesting that the anarcho-punk scene stimulated by Crass was as significant for the influence within its confines as microcosm as it was ‘without’ (was micromatic, in the sense I have described in chapter two, then):

⁵⁰ In our recorded conversation, furthermore, Rimbaud stated that in 1984 he had known that ‘we could get thousands of people marching from Sellafield or Windscale, whichever it’s called now, and we were going to call in at all of the different nuclear installations down to Westminster. And I think that there was no question that we probably would have got a good few thousand people marching daily – a, sort of, Jarrow march – but there was also no question that there’d be helicopters, riot police and a lot of violence...’. As the conversation proceeded, he remarked that ‘if we’d done that march then it would have been our/my/our [sic] responsibility. And we weren’t prepared to do it. Now, whether or not that is a failure of revolutionary spirit – maybe’.

The anarchist subject – from Max Stirner all the way up to Crass – proclaims that ‘there is no authority but yourself’. For Crass, the micro-perspective of focussing on the individual subject has been both their strength... but also one of their greatest potential weaknesses. [However], I’d suggest that Crass’s project, rather than global transformation and the construction of a new human subjectivity, is a more local and achievable one. That is, the effort to *keep possibilities open* through the cultural milieu of punk.⁵¹

Perhaps, then, Crass should have modified their slogan: there is no authority but *our own*. This might imply: no authority without justice; no justice without felt mutuality; and no felt mutuality without a certain weakness, a certain recoil, a certain willingness to open to the sense of justice which perhaps can arrive just in that moment when a certain recognition becomes apparent.⁵²

There can be no serious doubt that Crass ‘kept possibilities open’ for an underground punk milieu. In the twenty first century, the international punk underground remains hugely influenced by their activities, strategies and successes. By the mid-1980s, that said, the anarcho-punk movement was past its moment of greatest importance. (Even in its heyday, it had its knockers, it should be noted: Mark E. Smith from the Fall, for example, complained in 1980 of ‘the Crass attitude... which is like every dick in the

⁵¹ McKay, *Senseless*, p.98, emphasis retained.

⁵² McKay makes a similar suggestion in *DiY Culture*, arguing that the ‘DiY’ scene’s semi-Thatcherite ‘emphasis on self, self, self’ means that ‘maybe we should be talking less of Do it Yourself than of Do it Ourselves’, p.19 and p.27. Again, it is perhaps worth clarifying that the ‘felt mutuality’ I write of here could only be an irreciprocal reciprocity; a dissymmetrical recognition, in other words, which would stop short of dissolving the other in the same, at least if Derridean theory is to be adhered to.

street is a great person which is a load of crap'.⁵³) This was probably largely as a consequence of – the reluctant leaders – Crass's essentially micromatic shift towards experimentalism and eventual collapse as a collective, but also perhaps due to a range of new-sense developments elsewhere in the wider punk scene. I turn now to one of these, a very different beast from anarcho-punk which is perceived to have had its peak of significance around 1986.

Section Summary

Anarcho-punk was partly a response and a challenge to first wave punk. It was also partly a continuation of the tradition, with a clear 'supplementarity' in the sense that it is part of yet simultaneously distinct from the larger tradition. This is demonstrated by the fact that musical and political influences, from David Bowie to the anarchistic side of the hippie scene, were influential upon both first wave punk *and* anarcho-punk. In terms of anarchistic empowerment, Crass show a notable micromatic recoil both in their music and also in their lyrics, interviews and other pronouncements, to the extent

⁵³ Fanzine title unknown, culled from Sned of Flat Earth's personal archive of clippings about the Fall, interview stated to have been conducted on Saturday 15th November 1980 at Middlesbrough Rock Garden. Smith does give Crass some credit for keeping their record prices low but makes several hostile (and, it must be said, rather muddled, at least in the printed form) comments about the group. Around the same time he would make barbed comments elsewhere about 'a certain French-resistance type group' and references in song to 'circles with A in the middle, a circle of low IQs', doubtless intended as snipes at Crass and the anarcho-punks. Smith is very much a legendary figure for the underground punk/post-punk scenes, but clearly his ethos was not entirely in step with the idea that 'anyone can do it' – on the contrary, it seems that he believed the average 'dick in the street' had a 'low IQ' and, therefore, deserved what appears here to be contempt.

that they appear in various ways to have stepped back from what might otherwise appear to be their greatest ‘successes’ in macro-political terms. Penny Rimbaud, indeed, would appear to have maintained a decidedly extreme faith in self-empowerment over and above all collectivity. Conflict, by contrast, are a good example of a contrasting tendency in anarcho-punk in which collective power is conceived of as something to be seized rather than something to be problematised. Clearly, therefore, in this particular area of the punk tradition, agents have sometimes desired leadership, solidarity and other aspects more normally associated with the Marxist Left, whilst others have shown a more serious commitment to anarchistic strategies and values. In their moment, it seems that anarcho-punk bands such as Crass were able to use music to generate an aporetic new-sense which may, perhaps, have allowed some kind of justice to be felt amongst participants. This aporia can be argued to have been encouraged during the opening bars of Conflict’s ‘Increase the Pressure’, but is more consistently remarkable in Crass’s ‘End Result’: the latter piece is more harmonically unusual, less lyrically didactic and falls further outside of musical convention (including rock conventions) than the former.

iii. Indie-Pop Ain't Noise Pollution: The Cutie Movement⁵⁴

It's six years since Edwyn Collins declared 'worldliness must keep apart from me', twenty years since The Byrds sang 'I was so much older then/ I'm younger than that now' – now these dreams are coming to a new fruition. An idea of innocence and childhood possesses and pervades the indie scene. It's there in the names – Soup Dragons, Woodentops, Five Go Down To The Sea, Flowerpot Men, sweet names like James, June Brides, Mighty Lemon Drops, Talulah Gosh. It's present in the lyrics and cover artwork... It's there in the way fanzines privilege naivety and enthusiasm and mess...⁵⁵

These words were written in summer 1986 about a movement which the article does not name but which would subsequently be known variously as

- i. *cutie* – in reference to the tendencies noted above, which the writer sums up as 'the fantasy of "being like a child again"'.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ 'Indie-Pop Aint Noise Pollution' is the title of a Pooh Sticks song from 1988; the title is a deliberately mocking reference to AC/DC's 'Rock'n'Roll Aint Noise Pollution'.

⁵⁵ Reynolds, Simon, *Bring The Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop* (London: Faber, 2007), p.15 – first published in *Melody Maker*, June 1986.

⁵⁶ Ibid: p.15. Reynolds uses 'cutie' as his principal descriptor for this scene in his 2006 retrospective article for *TimeOut* magazine,

http://www.timeout.com/london/music/features/2167/The_C86_indie_scene_is_back.html#articleAfterMpu, accessed 3/10/10, emphasising that this and 'shambling' were the common labels 'back then'.

- ii. *shambling* – as John Peel described this scene, coining ‘a concept born out of “shambolic” and “rambling”’, another writer has argued fairly reasonably.⁵⁷
- iii. *jangly-pop* – due to the trebly guitar sound which many of the bands used, and perhaps also a desire for disjunction from mainstream, synth-based pop as well as the ‘metal’ guitar sound popular at the time.
- iv. *twee* – denoting something ‘small and sweet; sentimentally pretty’ with an obvious correlation, therefore, to the above descriptor ‘cutie’.⁵⁸
- v. *indie-pop* – signalling a combination of independent labels and populism, perhaps always a contradiction in terms (the outsider who wants to be inside and yet still, impossibly, remain outside, it could be argued). The term has become rather outdated thanks to the semantic transmutation of the word ‘indie’ over the decades since, moving from denotation of an operational tendency (releasing records without the aid of major labels) to

⁵⁷ Redhead, Steve, *The End-of-the-Century Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p.81. The description of the bands as ‘rambling’ is actually dubious since concision of song length and simplicity of lyrical/musical content were the order of the day. ‘Stumbling’ would be a fairer descriptor, with musical imprecision being the greatest commonality of this scene and a large part of its appeal for that minority, which included myself, who took pleasure in such a sound at the time.

⁵⁸ *The Chambers Dictionary*, 1998. ‘Twee pop’ has been increasingly common in more recent years as a descriptor for the types of indie pop bands I am discussing here. This belatedness is reflected in Kaya Oakes’s suggestion that twee pop begins in the early 1990s, post-Nirvana (*Slanted*, p.13). From a US perspective, there is probably some truth in this, yet it should be pointed out that early US twee pop groups such as, for example, Lois Maffeo, Black Tambourine and Beat Happening, were hugely influenced by and enthusiastic about the 1980s scene I am discussing here (all three of the US groups mentioned here stated as much during informal conversations during the 1990s).

a connotation of musical style as well as operationality and eventually, for all intents and purposes, a denotation of musical style alone with little or no sense of contradiction when ‘indie’ bands are released by major labels.⁵⁹

- vi. *C86* – after an *NME* compilation cassette of the same year which featured some of the bands mentioned above.

The last of these is the commonest name for the movement, particularly in more recent years (possibly because history, it has been claimed, is written by the winners and the *NME*, it should not be controversial to say, remains a dominant organ of vernacular discourse on pop, particularly for the under-25s). I have chosen, however, to refer to the scene as *cutie* in this study for two principal reasons. Firstly, because a

⁵⁹ One example, though countless more could be offered: *The Sunday Times* gave away a free CD in 2007 entitled *The State of Independence*. Tracks one (Bloc Party) and four (Peter, Bjorn and John) are listed as being published by EMI, track 2 (The Rakes) reveals a connection with Warner Chappell whilst track nine (Paul Weller) comes courtesy of BMG and track twelve (Field Music) is published by Chrysalis, the CD jacket informs us. Of the remaining tracks, most of the given details imply the labels and publishers to be of the punk/DIY-type – an implication arising from the names, such as Pathetic Hindsight, Netzwerk One and so on; names which *sound* as if they could only be the product of a ‘way out’ and commercially disinterested hipster (anti-)businessman. In reality, however, few if any will be truly independent in the sense in which that term was understood in the mid-1980s. Even if this turned out not to be the case, and none of these other tracks have received financial support from a major label, the fact that five of the thirteen performances on the CD are explicitly acknowledged as being published by major labels shows how little (none, essentially, in this example) denotative reference to separation from the majors is retained in the contemporary usage of the word ‘independence’ as featured in the CD’s title. In the 21st century, indie is a style of music and independence, at best, is now conceived of as a state of mind rather than any operational delimiter.

significant quantity of the bands on the *C86* compilation were not at all purveyors of the idealisation-of-childhood phenomenon outlined in the quoted paragraph above, an idealisation which I will be exploring in more detail below.⁶⁰ Secondly, (the flipside of the same argument) because many of the bands which people think of as being classic ‘C86’ bands were not in fact featured on *C86*.⁶¹ Cutie was a common descriptor for this music in the 1980s, and though ‘twee’ has become the more commonly used epithet in recent years, it has been rejected here largely for this reason: my research here attempts to engage as much as possible with the discourses in and around the scene in question *as they occurred at the time* (hence my heavy reliance upon quotation from prominent fanzines written at the time). In the UK in the 1980s, the descriptor twee was only ever used as denigration, whereas my auto-

⁶⁰ As has been noted by Rob Young, *Rough Trade* (London: Black Dog, 2006), p.188.

⁶¹ Various Artists, *C86* vinyl LP, ROUGH 100, Rough Trade, 1986. Thus bands of this era, which are now thought of as the most typical ‘C86’ bands, such as Talulah Gosh, the Chesterfields and the Razorcuts, are not actually featured on *C86*. Of the twenty two bands included on the compilation, eight were demonstrably developing a sound influenced by groups such as the Fire Engines, Captain Beefheart’s Magic Band and, particularly, the Fall (Stump, Bogshed, A Witness, Half Man Half Biscuit, the Servants, MacKenzies, bIG fLAME and the Shrubs being the eight bands in question), reflecting none of the traits of infantile-regression and jangly guitars normally associated with ‘C86’. At least one featured band (Age of Chance) was more-or-less the polar opposite of the cutie sound, with a stated preference for the mainstream 1980s pop of the likes of Prince (whose ‘Kiss’ they covered on a memorable television broadcast around this time), unmentionable for the kinds of fanzines I will be discussing in this chapter. Admittedly, some key cutie bands were featured on *C86*, such as the Pastels and the Shop Assistants, but overall I feel that the compilation, though an interesting snapshot of a general moment within the longer-term British indie scene, does not sum up the particular mid-1980s subculture it is normally associated with.

biographical recollection is that many of us were less uncomfortable when described as cuties.

The cutie scene was certainly a descendant of and continuation from the earlier waves of punk, and explicitly so. For example, *Are You Scared to Get Happy?* fanzine (*AYSTGH?* hereafter) had the slogan ‘getting back to basics... a punk rock fanzine’ on the front cover of its first issue. *AYSTGH?* was the organ which in many ways embodied the cutie ideal in conjunction with the associated Sha-la-la flexi-disc label,. The fanzine was particularly keen on the words ‘punk rock’, inscribing them on most of its pages (by issue 3 the writers were in-joking with small print at the bottom of a page that, despite their ranting, ‘I never mentioned P*NK R*CK...’⁶²). It was not isolated in this respect, however: most zines of the period, though perhaps less assiduous in mentioning punk, would name-check the connection even if only in sarcasm. For example, *Searching For the Young Soul Rebels* fanzine complains of an audience at a Clouds gig ‘wanting another nice, cute and SAFE pop group. “Undertonesy pure punk pop brilliance”? Aw, just fuck off, OK?’⁶³ The influence of punk upon ’80s indie pop remains well known, hence politician Alan Johnson’s recent question to cutie icon Amelia Fletcher in a Radio 4 interview: ‘This [the music of her band Talulah Gosh and similar 1980s cutie bands] was a different kind of music, this was away from agents and it arose from the punk scene?’⁶⁴ Amelia’s response is

⁶² *Are You Scared to Get Happy?*, Haynes, Matt, and Mark, Bristol and Sheffield, UK, 1985 (issue 1) and 1986 (issue 3). Elsewhere in issue 3 they write ‘PUNKrockPUNKrockPUNKrock and we’ve said it before but NEVER LOUD ENOUGH’.

⁶³ *Searching For the Young Soul Rebels... A Hatebomb* fanzine, Pete, Kent, 1987.

⁶⁴ *Alan Johnson: Failed Rock Star*, episode three, BBC Radio 4, broadcast August 2nd 2010.

suitably affirmative, stating clearly that cutie bands such as hers were very much part of ‘the whole Do It Yourself, DIY ethic [which] came out of punk’.⁶⁵

Punk, in other words, still loomed large as the paradigm in which 1980s ‘alternative’ music (certainly including the cutie scene) needed to be framed. Though fanzines such as *AYSTGH?* clearly perceived the scene as being ‘punk rock’ in character, however, cutie was very much a break with the punk tradition (anarcho-punk, for example, doubtless) at the same time as being a continuation of it. Steve Redhead, with only a few years hindsight at his time of writing, has even suggested that the cutie scene was actually a *conscious* attempt to break this lineage: ‘shambling manifestly struggled to wriggle free of the easy categorisation of pop discourse, media pigeon-holes and the insatiable media desire for a new ‘punk’ youth culture.’⁶⁶

This statement probably has some justification, given that the cutie bands were at their peak precisely one decade after punk is supposed to have begun and were probably eager to display some generational distinction. However, if Talulah Gosh, for example, were resistant to categorisation as a punk group (as Redhead claims), why would their vocalist, Amelia Fletcher, have retained for many years the Ramones-quoting ‘Hey Ho, Let’s Go!’ sticker placed on her guitar by their guitarist Pete Momtchiloff?⁶⁷ If cutie groups were struggling *not* to be punk, why did the likes of

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Redhead, *End-of*, p.83. There can be little doubt that by ‘shambling’ he means the perceived movement of groups such as Shop Assistants and Talulah Gosh which others called ‘cutie’ in the 1980s, given that he references both bands in the paragraph from which this quotation derives.

⁶⁷ Pete told me he put the sticker on the guitar at their first gig in, I believe, early 1986. It was still in place more than ten years later. Like most of the indie-pop groups from this period, Talulah Gosh loved

the Shop Assistants adopt a style of clothing/make-up/hair and musical presentation which bore so many hallmarks of earlier punk's music and style of appearance? These objections notwithstanding, Redhead is probably correct that the 'shambling' cutie groups were not as much searching for a 'new "punk" youth culture' as they were seeking, as Reynolds puts it, 'a new fruition'. This new-sense punk sound would revive aspects of a particular selection of 1970s punk groups (Buzzcocks, Subway Sect and the Undertones, in particular), but also combine that style with a hitherto deeply suppressed influence from the 1960s (Love, the Who and the Velvet Underground). Cutie's particular 'new'-sense, in other words, was in large part an amalgam of two eras, 1970s punk and 1960s rock; it seems to have felt new, nevertheless, to the participants of the time such as the fanzine writers and rock journalist already quoted above.

It is here, then, in the return of the repressed, as it were, that we see a formation through which cutie can reasonably be argued to have brought a strong supplementation to the larger punk trace: 1977, from this particular mid-1980s perspective, was no longer quite definable as year zero and, though the early 1970s groups (Pink Floyd, Genesis and so on) might still have been dismissed as boring old hippies, the sixties groups – or some of them – were being borrowed from explicitly by many of the mid-1980s bands in question.⁶⁸ Such a putting together of pre-existing

and were strongly inspired by the classic punk groups. Amelia told me in an informal conversation in the late 1990s that her favourite group of all during her teenage years was Joy Division – showing that musical appearances, in terms of influences, can be most deceptive.

⁶⁸ For example, on an autobiographical note, I recall a fairly exciting rendition of The Who's 'The Kids Are Alright' by the Soup Dragons at Kent University, Canterbury in 1987. At the time, I was sixteen years old and it struck me as surprising that such a group would be covering a sixties classic: the Sex

forms to create the appearance of new-ness would seem to fit the well-known post-modern model, of course. Thus Redhead has argued that ‘bands who contributed to the much-vaunted *C86* tape... were less a “new wave”, a new deviant “punk” subculture... than a new class of pop archaeologists’.⁶⁹ However, he is resistant to the idea that such bands represent a Jamesonian case of blank parody, calling such a view ‘overly pessimistic’ since the cutie groups actually produced ‘a “critical deconstruction” of the rock tradition – of rock theory, of a rock aesthetic – without involving a simple return to its “origins”; it cannot be read as a revival, pure and simple of earlier moments in pop history’.⁷⁰

The critique is good – particularly with Redhead’s pointed observation that Jameson’s conception of the 1960s as pop’s period of ‘high modernism’ needs to be problematised since, in fact, popular music is more reasonably figured as post-

Pistols and obviously the Jam are known to have performed such material yet, in the long *aftermath* of punk, covers like this were rare, normally being left for ‘pub rock’ covers bands. After the cutie era, ‘the sixties’ became a more accepted reference point amongst punk/post-punk groups, as is reflected in the rise of a succession of UK sub-cultures (‘baggy’, 1990s ‘indie’, ‘Brit Pop’, etc.) and the fact that few if any sixteen years olds today would be shocked to hear a Who cover and, indeed, many punk-orientated bands – Billy Childish’s various groups of the twenty first century, for example – offer homages to and/or cover versions of the Who and other giants of 1960s rock (Childish, for example, has also covered songs by Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin in recent years whereas his 1980s/1990s group Thee Headcoats preferred to cover more obscure ‘nuggets’).

⁶⁹ Redhead, *End-of*, p.65; Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

⁷⁰ Redhead, *End-of*, p.65.

modernist *from the beginning*⁷¹ – yet it raises further questions of a prickly nature. What, for example, if these groups had attempted pop archaeology *without* any ‘critical deconstruction’? Would we then gain that pure, simple revival of the earlier moment in pop history, of the ‘origins’ which the uncritical hypothetical band would parody in a blank fashion? Such a conclusion would be barred from Derridean theory as outlined in chapter two above: the reiteration would be new in a strict sense whilst the ‘original’ pop would necessarily be built upon traces in any case. Redhead’s point, however, using the term I have offered in the last chapter, is that the cutie groups brought a new-sense (rather than something entirely ‘new’) to the pop/rock tradition. A relevant issue, from the point of view of my research here, is as to the political consequences of cutie without new-sense (post-punk rock with unabashed eagerness to re-create the sixties golden age, that is). I return to this issue in the chapter conclusion below.

The new-sense offered by cutie groups ranged from replication of intensely idealised sixties-ish details (Primal Scream’s imitation of the Byrds’ guitar sound, tambourine parts and even haircuts, for example⁷²) to those for whom a wider range of references can be discerned within the text (the Brilliant Corners, whose more overtly dissonant work will be discussed further below, would be an example of such). The cuties’ new-

⁷¹ Ibid: p.94. If Redhead is gesturing at, for example, *Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* LP with his reference to ‘earlier moments in pop history’, it would seem obvious that *Pepper*’s particular use of de-contextualised pastiche and rather blank parody makes it a classically post-modern text, as it were.

⁷² Primal Scream have had numerous incarnations of course, the above description fitting only the band’s first issued recordings. Subsequent ‘make-over’ re-births have included greasy rockers, white-denim ravers and even ‘revolutionary’ anti-capitalists, it seems.

sense was nevertheless supplementary (somewhat linked, that is) to the punk trace in the sense that both maintained certain crucial operational elements of what, by 1986, could certainly be called punk orthodoxy. Punk's earthquake-like effect upon the music industry (and upon the available alternatives which had grown out from the 1970s wave) was still making tremors in the mid-1980s. One of these was the kind of commitment to independent labels as outlined in chapter one (indeed the *C86* compilation was conceived as a supplement to 1981s *C81* cassette, with both explicitly posited as evidence that post-punk 'indie' music retained great strength and value, and that it would soon rise to greater influence⁷³). Furthermore, a certain punk-derived political commitment remained central in cutie, hence *C86* recording artists McCarthy's statement, in 1986, that 'there's still a world to win [and] my *red* dream is everything'.⁷⁴ What, we might therefore ask, were the cuties trying to win at a time when Thatcher's Conservative party was about to win its third consecutive general election – a new world, the best parts of an old one or something less easily summarised?

⁷³ These proclamations of faith in the imminent success of indie labels were part of the explicit *raison d'être* of the *C81* and *C86* compilations, according to articles and promotional comments printed in *NME* – which compiled the two tapes – at the time.

⁷⁴ McCarthy, 'Red Sleeping Beauty', 12" EP, Pink Records, PINKY12T, 1986. There is no need, in this case, for doubt as to whether the word 'red' was thus placed as a reference to the revolutionary socialism often associated with that particular colour: McCarthy had many explicitly Marxist songs – 'The Procession of Popular Capitalism', for example, from their first LP (*I am a Wallet*, Midnight Music, CHIME 00.45 S, 1989) – and it is quite certain that the 'red dream' mentioned in this song was of, as they say, the glorious day.

Younger Than – When? Whom?

Simon Reynolds' recent anthology of some of his key published writings since 1985 shines significant light upon an idea of the ultimate importance of new-ness, from the introduction onwards: 'Whenever I hear complaints that a new sound is... 'just not music', my ears prick up. These spasms of disgust and horror... are often early signals that the New Thing has emerged.'⁷⁵ The book in question, *Bring the Noise*, certainly shows Reynolds' impressive knack for spotting New Things of the soon-to-be-commercially-successful/critically-applauded type: Nirvana, say, or the Stone Roses. Of course, a critical assessment of such success in noticing sales potential would have to acknowledge that widely respected writers such as Reynolds partly fulfil their own prophecy of any given group's degree of 'promise' through the very act of writing about them (*NME* puts *x* band on the cover, *x* band has a hit record and, consequently, *NME* rejoices in its knack for talent-spotting, ignoring their own role in the process, in short).

Such problems notwithstanding, the complaint misses the cases where a journalist notices a band of which few others will take notice until considerably later. In the main, Simon Reynolds can quite justifiably claim significant foresight of this type, it is fair to say, and his 1986 article 'Younger than Yesterday' is a good example of such.⁷⁶ This timely coverage in *Melody Maker* of what would become known as the

⁷⁵ Reynolds, *Bring*, p.xii.

⁷⁶ For another example, see his review of the first Beat Happening album as re-printed in *Bring the Noise* but originally published in November 1986. Beat Happening were ripe for comparison with the UK cutie scene yet, other than Everett True's *The Legend!* fanzine, which was also writing of them from 1985 onwards, very few writers noticed this now highly-regarded group until many, many years

cutie scene (amongst other names) had crucial importance for the scene which he there defined in large part (even if he did not name it). Reynolds begins his retrospective/supplementary comments to the re-print of the ‘Younger than Yesterday’ article in his *Bring the Noise* collection by acknowledging this himself: ‘the piece that made my name’.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, his ambivalence about this scene is notable elsewhere in his writings: for example, in his book *Rip It Up and Start Again* Reynolds states baldly that ‘C86 was post-punk with the most radical elements (the politics, the black/white fusion, the studio experimentation) purged’.⁷⁸ Interestingly, however, he also admits that, in 1983 and then a second time as he was in the process of writing *Rip It Up*’s chronological examination of the 1978-84 era of ‘alternative’ music, ‘I’d overdosed on dry, anally retentive post-punk and found myself compulsively listening to Byrds/Love/Hendrix as a release – anything loose, intuitive, ecstatic, rockin’!’.⁷⁹

In a sense, the cutie bands were adding ‘some past’ to 1970s punk’s ‘no future’ creed precisely by going back to the kinds of 1960s reference points listed here. Reynolds seems to have sympathised with this supplementation to at least some extent, leading presumably to his critical promotion of the scene at that time. The cuties may not exactly have been ‘rockin’’, but they certainly played loosely and were also going

later. The stature of the group in question has increased consistently in the intervening decades, and Reynolds’ early attentiveness to their distinctive music is one example of the kind of critical assessment which has earned him such a significant reputation.

⁷⁷ Ibid: p.19.

⁷⁸ Reynolds, *Rip*, p.522.

⁷⁹ Ibid: p.520.

back to some of the ‘pre-punk’ sources in which Reynolds too was contemporaneously finding ‘the frisson of forbidden fruit’.

The cuties scene’s new-sense, if indeed they brought such a thing, was substantially retrospective in its character, then. It would not be difficult to construct an argument that punk has always had a strongly retrospective character, indeed. First wave (or close to it) punk groups such as the Sex Pistols, the Vibrators and the Nipple Erectors, for example, owed a clear debt to the pre-punk ‘pub rock’ sound of groups such as Dr. Feelgood and Kilburn and the High Roads.⁸⁰ The post-punk groups Reynolds describes in *Rip It Up* were identifiably experimental, that said, with sounds beyond the normal palette of popular music. Reynolds correctly notes that the groups he

⁸⁰ Quizzed by Janet Street Porter on the *London Weekend Show*’s special on punk (length of broadcast unknown, Thames Television, 1976) about the influence of pub rock, Sex Pistol Glen Matlock admits the importance of such groups but complains of it being music ‘for mums and dads’. The Vibrators offered little more or less than a slightly speeded-up, r’n’b twelve-bar format with very moderately ‘shocking’ lyrics such as ‘Judy says she’s going to knock you in the head tonight’ (‘Judy Says (Knock You in the Head)’, 7", Epic, EPC6393, 1978). Nipple Erectors’ debut single, ‘King of the Bop’, is a straightforward piece of Elvis-inspired rockabilly (vocalist Shane MacGowan would continue as promoter of a punk-plus-tradition synthesis in his later band the Pogues) (7", Soho Records, SH2, 1978). Meanwhile, Dr. Feelgood’s album *Sneakin’ Suspicion* shows a definite punk-ish-ness, with their guitarist Wilco Johnson being a well-known inspiration for key post-punk guitarist Andy Gill of Gang of Four (LP, United Artists, FA 3179, 1977). Pub rock stalwarts Kilburn and the Highroads quickly re-christened themselves Ian Dury and the Blockheads in the glare of London’s punk explosion, releasing the strongly Sex Pistols-recalling *New Boots and Panties*, in 1976 – the stark, cockney voice which introduces ‘Plaistow Patricia’ (‘fucking bastards, arseholes, cunts and pricks’) sounds uncannily like Crass’s Steve Ignorant and may feasibly have been an influence upon the latter (LP, Stiff, SEEZ 4, 1976).

delimits as 'post-punk' also experimented with musical content more than the groups understood to constitute the first wave of punks had done. His faith seems to be that first wave punk and post-'post-punk' cutie music were both nostalgic, retrospective and musically conservative whereas the 1978-84 post-punk groups were truly original, not just bearers of a new-sense but genuinely new.

There are problems with this idea, however. For one thing, the punk groups in the 1978-84 period (the first wave of what Reynolds calls 'post-punk' - hereafter FWPP to distinguish it from the slightly later cutie period which was also certainly post-punk in a definite sense) may have wanted to rip up history and start again, but the actual musical products were inevitably tied to traces they could never fully escape. The specific song 'Rip It Up and Start Again' by Orange Juice, for example, is a fairly basic pastiche of light-funk and r'n'b crooning; with a slightly different production style, it could certainly have made sense in the charts a decade before it was actually written and recorded. The FWPP bands were very often interested in producing a New Thing, yes; the thing is, however, nothing comes from a vacuum.

Many of the bands Reynolds accounts for in *Rip It Up* were active prior to 1976, doing similar experiments. Genesis P. Orridge, for example, was producing transgressive art with COUM prior to 1976, though admittedly he was not active in the music scene until the first wave of punk inspired him to form Throbbing Gristle; the Residents, whom Reynolds discusses at length in his account of FWPP, were sending out demo tapes in 1971 and put out their debut LP *Meet the Residents* in 1974; and so on. Reynolds glosses over such problematic chronology – for example, his caveat that 'the Residents *feel* like a post-punk band' both acknowledges and

effectively dismisses the fact they were actually antecedents of punk⁸¹ – but the inconsistency is fundamentally problematic. Putting it briefly, when the ‘post-’ is actually pre-, there is a terminological problem in the chronological account.

Many first wave punk groups were inspired by ‘experimental’ music, in fact. For example, Rob Blamire of Newcastle’s Penetration, a significant first wave punk group who were certainly not a FWPP band, told me in 1998 that, in 1976-7, he and his bandmates/friends were mostly listening to Can, Faust and suchlike – the ‘prog’ experimentalism of the so-called ‘krautrock’ scene. Penetration are not mentioned in *Rip It Up*, probably for the good reason that they were punk, not ‘post-punk’ in any identifiable sense; but one also has to wonder if such a band is excluded for the risk of undermining Reynolds’ central thesis. Admittedly, others in the first wave may have been less interested in opening up new aural horizons; the Clash, for example, whose music was both harmonically and rhythmically restricted to conventional rock patterns. There again, elements of conservatism and musical retrospection were present within the FWPP period, as noted above with regard to the actual song ‘Rip It Up and Start Again’, for example. On balance, Reynolds makes too strong a case for the new-ness of the FWPP bands he writes about, on the one hand, and, on the other, he underplays the new-sense which is in fact identifiable in the mid-1980s cutie scene I am writing of here.

Having said that, it is true that the cutie scene offered a somewhat reactionary response to ‘noise’ groups. By the mid-1980s, dissonance and harsh timbres had become the dominant style within a large part of the punk underground; not just

⁸¹ Reynolds, *Rip*, p.247.

FWPP and anarcho-punk but also the emergent US ‘hardcore’ punk sound, about which more information will be given in chapter four below. The first issue of *AYSTGH?*, the crucial cutie zine mentioned above, articulated this resistance to noise very clearly.

It’s a pretty poor reflection on these times that people can only think of threat and challenge in terms of the blunt instrument of noise that is the Membranes, or find stimulation in the tired empty hackneyed ‘political’ gesturings of the [Billy] Braggs, [Three] Johns, Redskins and a million others, music not from the heart but the Labour Party manifesto ... aw, of course it’s important, but what on earth does making boring uninspired unimaginative records do to further your cause, conning people who can ill afford it into buying them... are these people really so stupid they think pandering to the smug middle-class complacency of the *NME* while wallowing in the adoration of the credibility-giving smugness of *Bzaag/Rouska/* every other bloody fanzine currently stifling any musical inventiveness in this fucking country fiddling while homes burn will actually achieve anything?⁸²

It is in fact debatable whether this resistance to ‘the blunt instrument of noise’ is reactionary in the normal sense of the word, for it is clear that the writer perceives the music he is criticising as lacking in ‘inventiveness’ and, therefore, it would seem that noise here is perceived as something of a consonance in its context, in a sense: noise as the dominant standard, beyond or outside of which inventive new bands should strive to travel (I return to this issue in the thesis conclusion below). *AYSTGH?*’s

⁸² *AYSTGH?* issue 1, 1985, underscoring retained from original text.

preferred path away from the standardised noise sound was clear to the fanzine's authors: hearts, flowers, bright colours and pop music:

Can you honestly listen to [the Membranes'] *Death to Trad Rock* all the way through? No, of course you can't... so try something different for a change. Like what? Like... the June Brides, a potentially MASSIVE pop group who've already released two singles... happy, chaotic popsters... when they played the Bristol Mission Club in May [1985] they started 'In The Rain' for a second time but took it so fast that Phil Wilson couldn't get the words out... they tried again, to no avail, hurtling along into a final discordant collapse... brilliant!⁸³

Such enthusiasm for unprofessional musicianship was fundamental to the late-1980s indie-pop sound of which the June Brides were one of the earliest examples.

(Unsuccessful might be a better word than unprofessional here, unless the 'shambling' effect was desired, which is conceivable and was frequently an explicit accusation at the time, with cutie groups often being labelled 'contrived'.) It is worth noting that the band are also described in *AYSTGH?* as 'tight and righteous punk-rockers... I can't wait to see the June Brides on *TOTP*, pouring out their thoughts and hearts to the nation, inspiring and exciting in a way we haven't seen for at least five years... these should be your new heroes...'⁸⁴

The June Brides, in the eyes of *AYSTGH?*, then, were a beacon for an imminent return of good, *punk* bands in a pop mainstream symbolically represented by TV show *Top*

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

of the Pops (TOTP). The fact that the fanzine authors were calling for a *return* to something from five years earlier or more indicates that there are at least some grounds for perceiving their desires as being somewhat reactionary. The thing which tempers this reactionary element, as we just noted, is the fact that the cutie groups, or at least the zines which were promoting them, perceived the punk-orientated music of ‘at least five years’ previous (anarcho-punk, FWPP and so on) as being a ‘blunt instrument’ by the mid-1980s. The agenda for the cutie scene, then, was to sharpen their instruments (as it were) and to take indie music ‘to the nation’. This agenda set out, the zines which promoted bands such as June Brides, Jasmine Minks and Hurrah! were never short of extravagant predictions:⁸⁵

Look, I want the Clouds to take on the likes of Curiosity Killed The Cat in the latters [sic] terms – do the whole thing, y’know, *Smash Hits*, No. 1, *the Wide Awake Club* – and win... They could teach U2 (and Hurrah!) a thing or two about playing stadiums as well, and why not? The Beatles did it with style.⁸⁶

No such fate actually transpired for the Clouds, however. Given their generally predictable music, indeed, the surprising thing is that such a claim was ever made on

⁸⁵ Hurrah! were very strongly supported by a small group of mid-1980s fanzine-writers, following Kevin Pearce’s ravings about the band in his legendary *Hungry Beat* zine. Pearce was eventually published ‘officially’ (a publication with a spine, often joked of by zine-writers as a ‘sell-out’), referencing many of the same bands he had promoted in his zines: Vic Godard, Paul Weller and the Buzzcocks, for example (*Something Beginning With O*, London: Heavenly, no date given – probably early 1990s).

⁸⁶ Peter, *Searching*, 1987. The reference to Hurrah! was a consequence of their appearance as support act to U2 at a stadium concert of the same year.

their behalf: although the tambourine is shaken with impressive vigour, its sound is very familiar indeed, contextually speaking. By the end of the 1980s, even previously stalwart promoters of the idea that an indie-pop take-over was imminent, such as Matt Haynes of *AYSTGH?*, were acknowledging a growing problem related to the cutie zines' intensely-held belief in 'our bands':

I found a new fanzine today; it fumed with derision and dripped contempt upon those not sharing THE WRITER'S OPINIONS. It made me sad; for such smug, arrogant SELF is just FASCIST HATE not constructive fury... You call yourself a Socialist yet scorn 99% of humanity because (goodness me) it doesn't even like THE SAME MUSIC AS YOU.

AND IF IT DID, YOU'D HATE IT EVEN MORE.⁸⁷

The last critique is very powerful (even without the capitalisation): that notwithstanding rhetoric to the contrary, in fact the cutie subculture's *raison d'être* was not to infiltrate the mainstream (despite the claims made in various fanzines quoted so far) but, rather, simply to criticise it (as this fanzine writer suggests). Perhaps this is so; perhaps the cutie groups never really did expect to appear on *TOTP* and create a new mainstream musical sound. Let us consider this as a possible truth: if

⁸⁷ Haynes, Matt, *Sarah 144A: 'Cold'*, Bristol, c.1989, emphasis retained. Taking these comments alongside the author's statement in a previous Sarah records zine (*Sarah 4*: no sub-title) that he 'sat glum through [a playing of] the first side of the Redskins LP, and then they turned it over for the other side and DEAR GOD ALMIGHTY I wanted to HURT them', his position would appear rather contradictory, we can note. Here, after all, we indeed see a rather comparable hate also generated on grounds of someone else not 'liking the same music as you'.

groups such as Talulah Gosh, the Razorcuts, the Pastels and the Shop Assistants never truly expected to bump Bruce Springsteen from the chart – as seems probable, rhetoric and genuine expectation often being quite different things – would charges of ‘elitism’ thus be proven? Would it necessarily follow, in other words, that the cuties, in their ‘mix’n’match’ of the Byrds and the Buzzcocks (to summarise the sound reductively yet with substantially relevant encapsulation nevertheless), were simply trying to pose as being different from and superior to ‘the masses’?

The point is worth dwelling on because the charge of elitism (‘indie snobbery’) was frequently made against the cuties and is still often directed towards the remaining punk underground overall today. If we prefer the microcosm to the macrocosm, are we then necessarily parochial exhibitors of ‘fascist hate’? It seems fair to presume that this does not have to be the case. For one thing, fascism involves leadership through force, it should not be controversial to say. By contrast, the micromatic recoil, as I conceive it, proposes the other as ‘stronger than I am’ (to quote Derrida). Indie-pop, for the people who were making it, writing about it and buying the records in the mid-1980s, made sense; it was good, the participants agreed (though such and such band might have been praised to the heavens in one fanzine and given a severe drubbing in another). It does not necessarily have to follow that this sense of good-ness in the micro-scene must precipitate a hatred or even dislike of all those outside, though it appears that this did occur at least in some cases if the above writer is to be believed.

The question of when participation in a small subculture turns into ‘elitism’ is a moot one. Are jazz fans elitist if they claim the performers they admire as being obviously superior to the pop scene at large? Perhaps so, but it is worth remembering that sub-

cultures do have a degree of democratisation when it comes to the flow of fashion. Freedom of opinion ('I think *x* is indubitably superior to *y*') is a pre-condition of a non-totalitarian state, of course. Such a liberalist (Marxists might say *voluntarist*) form of 'freedom' should not be accepted too easily, we should hasten to add: individuality is an attribute which becomes void when there is no group against which the 'individuality' can be measured, to put it briefly, so liberal freedom is always limited. Yet, in terms of the 'fascist hate' referred to by the fanzine writer quoted above, the wish for '99% of humanity' to conform to the musical taste of the one percent minority *does* seem to replicate part of the problematic of the totalitarian state.

We can also note, contrary-wise, that the charge of elitism has sometimes been levelled at underground bands specifically because they seem to have *no* ambition for fame (more elitist than fascist, in such a case, then).⁸⁸ This lack of 'ambition' may well have been particularly annoying for the rock weeklies (*NME* and so on) precisely because 'indie no-hopers' which don't bother to try to sell beyond the existing scene threaten to ruin journalists' livelihoods: the weeklies need new bands every week to survive, for obvious reasons, and stalled record sales are always likely to correspond to stalled paper sales. Beyond such vested interests, comparable complaints are also often voiced amongst record-buying *milieu* ('fans'), I would argue. The letter writer quoted at the top of chapter two, for example, would surely not accept that punk/post-

⁸⁸ 'Indie elitism' was a frequent accusation from *NME* and other UK rock weeklies towards Sarah records. Auto-biographically, I might add that the same complaint was levelled at the Slampt label which I co-ran in the 1990s (Slampt has been claimed as an inheritor of the spirit of Sarah records by some UK fans, it is perhaps also worth reporting from conversations with notable contemporary cutie-orientated label-owners Sean Price of Fortuna Pop and John Jervis of Where It's At Is Where You Are).

punk undergrounds could ‘matter’ if they remain happy to operate within a tradition; what would be the point in that?, she seems to say with her dismissal of ‘handicrafts’ and those who are not ‘saying something new’.⁸⁹

In addition to these criticisms of alleged ‘elitism’ from journalists and fans, misunderstanding of the impetus of the indie/punk underground’s lack of ambition may have also occurred in scholarly realms. Writing about *Rock Culture in Liverpool* around the time that the indie scene’s alleged renaissance was in full swing, for example, Sarah Cohen claimed never to have encountered such a thing: ‘In order to “make it” all had to try to reach a wider audience, which necessitated appearing on record. I never encountered a band that did not want to do so’, she claims.⁹⁰ In fact, however, Cohen’s argument – that all groups wanted to ‘make it’ – is somewhat undermined by a specific band which looms large in her book. Half Man Half Biscuit were significant enough in the Liverpool scene of which she was writing (indeed in the national UK indie scene within which they still have a large fan base) for her to have needed to mention them many times in her ethnographic study of the mid-1980s Liverpool music scene. Noticing the band’s failure to capitalise on the national reputation they had forged around 1986, Cohen rationalises their lack of ambition as a

⁸⁹ The complaint about indie bands’ lack of ambition attributed to ‘fans’, here, is comparable but also distinct from the complaint from journalists and what I have called ‘vested interests’ as discussed in the first part of the above paragraph, it is perhaps worth mentioning. The distinction is that, for the latter constituency, the ambition (or, rather, the lack thereof) is with regard to ‘fame’, whereas for the fans, such as the letter writer mentioned above, it is an ambition to ‘say something new’ which seems to be felt to be lacking in some indie bands.

⁹⁰ Cohen, Sarah, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p.133.

crisis of confidence: ‘The lead singer/composer of Half Man, Half Biscuit found the pressure of marketing upon his creativity so hard to cope with that he split the band up not long after it achieved success.’⁹¹ A very different view is taken by Steve Redhead, however:

Having achieved independent chart success on the Probe Plus label, the band members went back on the dole determined to write a football fanzine for Third and Fourth Division League Clubs, especially their beloved Tranmere Rovers. The band’s most celebrated moment was indeed their refusal of a spot on Channel 4’s pop show of the time, *The Tube* – produced in Newcastle – because its live transmission on a Friday night coincided with a Tranmere home fixture.⁹²

Cohen’s and Redhead’s accounts diverge in an obvious way: where the former presumes the lack of interest in ‘success’ as despair/displeasure, the latter perceives a certain joy (their un-ambitiousness was ‘celebrated’ at the time, he correctly notes) in the rejection of apparent opportunity. Both versions probably have some legitimacy, since clearly *something* caused the Biscuits to no longer wish to be a band and that something appears in both interpretations to be negative emotions with regard to media systems and the recording industry. Yet in the broader context – the context beyond this specific case – Redhead’s point is undeniable. To put it metaphorically, it is in fact possible to walk in to the UK chain store ‘What Everyone Wants’ and find there *nothing* which one wants, and therefore to walk out. Half Man, Half Biscuit, on

⁹¹ Cohen, *Rock*, p.133.

⁹² Redhead, *End-of*, p.32.

their way out of the shop as it were, may well have felt cause for celebration, as Redhead implies above.

Half Man, Half Biscuit provide one example, but I believe this attitude (a lack of ‘ambition’ for wealth and adulation) to be more common than not in the cutie scene and in underground punk overall. Talking in the 1987 *South Bank Show* special on the Smiths (a band with a large and surprisingly under-discussed influence upon the cutie movement), John Peel neatly summarised the attitude:

When punk came along, a lot of groups realised that if they mugged a few old ladies or knocked over a few phone boxes, they could put out a record. But, having done that, they would then split up: they’d done something they wanted to do and didn’t particularly feel the need to make a career out of it.⁹³

What, it is worth asking then, *did* these bands want to get out of it, if not ‘a career’? What, in other words, was ‘it’, if not a job? Perhaps simply a recognition with or engagement of others; some kind of mutual empowerment on a micro level, a

⁹³ *South Bank Show*, dir. Tony Knox, ITV, 53 minutes, first broadcast 18th October 1987. The Smiths’ influence upon the cutie scene is manifest in the flowery imagery, the ‘jangly’ guitars, the predominance of angst-ridden lyrics, the often flat and monotonal singing, the expectation of chart success, even the record sleeves many of which borrowed directly from the Smiths’ strategy of picturing some icon of yesteryear (usually from the 1960s) with no clear connection to the group nor the songs contained on the record itself. It is probably no coincidence that the Smiths’ demise corresponds very closely to the period in which cutie became heavily derided in the UK rock weeklies: by autumn ’87, it seemed less likely than ever that indie bands would rule the charts, though bands at least *described* as ‘indie’ would become prominent sellers from 1989 onwards.

micromatic empowerment we might call it, with recognition of the greater strength of the other implied in indie/punk's willingness to just do 'it' within the scene. Half Man, Half Biscuit preferred to watch Tranmere Rovers than to appear on national television? Who, then, *did* they want listening to their music? Just a few fans, it seems, but not everyone (though perhaps 'anyone', nevertheless).

As with anarcho-punk, it is fair to presume that significant implications regarding the attitudes and aspirations of participants in a music-orientated sub-culture will be recognisable in the music: cutie bands were music makers, after all, and cutie fans were record buyers. An examination follows, therefore, of two particular pieces from the mid-1980s punk sub-culture I am writing of here; tracks three and four on the CD supplied. To whom was the music seeking to call? What response might it have kindled in all the other others ('the mainstream')? What are the political implications of the sound of this music, in terms of empowerment?

*I wonder why.*⁹⁴

A forlorn voice intones a nursery rhyme-like five note phrase. A fairly 'clean' (by punk standards) electric guitar strums out the familiar 'harmonic facts' of a three-chord-trick. These three primary chords of the major key are played in the open position, chords which many beginners learn before any others: D major, E major then the three-in-a-row A major. A snare drum joins in, slowing the tempo perhaps clumsily but feasibly as part of an organised moment within the arrangement. The

⁹⁴ The Pastels, 'I Wonder Why', *Suck On The Pastels: Retrospective 1983-1985*, Creation, CRELP 031, 1988, first issued as a 7" on Rough Trade, RT 137, 1983.

snare itself sounds as if it is either a triggered sample from an electronic pad or, perhaps more likely, has been ‘badly’ engineered with a distortion-inducing close-mike recording (though, again, it is quite possible for such a mike-technique to be through aesthetic preference rather than error, hence the quotes around the word badly here).

Certainly not a militaristic gallop *a là* Crass, the drumming is identifiably punk-style with its Ramones-like steady fours on the hi-hats, the ‘kick’ and snare beats placed without syncopation on the first and third beats of the bar.⁹⁵ Above this steady rhythmic gait, the maudlin-sounding singer indicates the main theme of the lyric: a sense of out-of-place-ness in the ‘big’ world:

I wonder why the world’s so big,
I wonder why the sky’s so far,
I wonder why the sea’s so deep,
I wonder why the trees grow tall.

At this point, a very simple (again, childishly simple one can reasonably say) high melodic line comes to the fore from the electric guitar. Its basic movement from the dominant note down to the root of the tonic sounds as if it may well be delivered using one finger on one string, again suggesting a novice player with the most

⁹⁵ It is notable, in advance of the discussion of grrrl-punk which will be offered in chapter four, that the Pastels drummer at this time and for many years afterwards was a young woman going by the name Bernice. With Stephen Pastel’s then-girlfriend Aggi also in the band, it is perhaps not surprising that some of the riot grrrl affiliates (including members of Huggy Bear, who I recall as being present at Pastels gigs in the very early 1990s) had a liking for the band.

rudimentary capabilities. Yet though the music is rudimentary in its performative requirements, it is played with panache: it is simple, but strident in its jauntiness. That up-beat musicality, however, disguises some darkness in the lyrical theme:

I wonder why I was born,

I wonder why I get so scared,

I wonder when I'm going to die...

I wonder why I feel angry,

I wonder when I'll be happy...

It would be unfair, therefore, to typify the song as being an entirely retrogressive 'fantasy of being a child again', to re-quote Reynolds: though perhaps *adolescently* juvenile, with its focus on death, anger and confusion, the song is typical of many lyrics from punk bands. It is no more juvenile than a majority of the songs in the punk *oeuvre*, overall. There are strong hints of childishness, admittedly: the one-note piano part which interjects towards the end of the song recalls an infant joyously stabbing repeatedly on the key of a toy instrument; the vocal is delivered in a register most pre-pubescent boys could easily attain; the guitar, as noted, sounds as if it is in the hands of a near-beginner; and so on. But the piece, overall, sounds as if it being played by young adults with a strong sense of the value of musical simplicity – not as if they are children with little consciousness of their limited competence.

Glasgow's the Pastels – the band which performed 'I Wonder Why' and, it is fair to say, were probably the most significant instigators for the cutie style – sound like a classic 'anyone can do it' punk band on this recording. The song falls apart at the end,

with various band members straying out of time from each other and rambling off in various directions. Yet it seems as if the players, though rudimentary in skill, are playing parts which allow them full confidence in their own capabilities: they sound, on my reading, as if they are enjoying doing what they can do. Amateurishness, in this song and in many much-loved punk-orientated recordings, seems to be worn ‘on the sleeve’, as it were: my research on the band has produced no reason to believe the Pastels felt any shame with regard to their musicianship, and there is every reason to believe that many punk fans actively enjoy hearing ‘mistakes’ on recordings.⁹⁶ It is possible, of course, that this amateurishness was deliberately performed, a possibility which Rob Young hints at when he complains that ‘The Pastels’ “I Wonder Why” recalled the *inspired* amateurism of the Television Personalities but lacked the self-deprecating humour’.⁹⁷

Performatively amateurish or otherwise, the Pastels were certainly ‘trail-blazers’ of a sort, having issued their first single in 1982. By the time their amateurist pop sound had been borrowed from by a slew of British bands, from around 1985 onwards, their vocalist Stephen Pastel had begun to attempt to distance his band from some of those he had influenced. In a 1987 fanzine from Sarah records, for example, Matt Haynes (previously of *AYSTGH?* fanzine and the Sha-la-la flexi-disc-only label) complains of a sneering comment he attributes to ‘St. Stephen’, the Glaswegian cutie icon: ‘Every

⁹⁶ A good example of this is Crime’s ‘Hot-wire My Heart’ 7" where the drummer plays a full verse and chorus, at the outset of the song, precisely a crotchet out of time with the rest of the group (7", Crime Music, SAC 0188, 1976). Far from spoiling the music, the disorientating error actually is a great part of the recording’s allure.

⁹⁷ Young, *Rough*, p.107, emphasis added.

morning when I wake up I put on a Sha-la-la flexi and feel so...’ (elliptical dots retained from original). Haynes responds angrily:

Well now, that’s odd. Every morning when I wake up, Stephen, I put on a Sha-la-la flexi and feel so...

ANGRY

ANGRY

FRUSTRATED

that all these gestures should still be necessary and still be misunderstood... but then, unlike St. Stephen, I’m not so tired and smug and in love with some pitiful idea of myself that I can’t still FEEL... It’s all about fields and sunshine??? No, Stephen, it was just I dunno LIFE, HOPE, NOT GIVING IN, POSITIVITY...⁹⁸

This zine was the first extended missive from Sarah records. As if to remind us that the label project was punk-political, Haynes goes on to describe a journey to sign on at the dole office:⁹⁹

⁹⁸ *Sarah 4* zine, Matt Haynes, Bristol, UK, 1988.

⁹⁹ The general sense of politics in the Sarah label was established from the first release (Sea Urchins’ ‘Pristine Christine’, Sarah, SARAH 1, 1987). Early Sarah-released 45s had the legend ‘Don’t talk to me about compromise because I’ll only reply with ideals and principles and energy and enthusiasm and excitement and a hundred other suchlikes you’ve never heard of for which read you’re dead and I’m alive...’ written in small lettering as a circle around the edge of each single’s label. In the centre of the label, a pretty flower picture was probably intended to symbolise the label’s general *positivity* (and an

Nelson Street, Wednesday at nine, cold and downtrodden but then finding one lonely 'ANGRY' [the 'A' is circled in the classic anarcho-punk style in the original text] paintsprayed in bloodred on freshly scrubbed tiles and feeling that adrenalin surge, THAT prickle across the skin, and finding it's somehow THE SAME... same lump in the throat, same wide-open eyes, same urge to just RUN.

As Sarah records proceeded, more obviously political references became increasingly common in the literature the label was publishing – literature which included wordy 'inserts' accompanying each 7" they would issue, as well as the two label-owners' numerous zines. For example, one page in the fanzine *Cold* (c.1989) attacks Alan McGee of Creation records for exploiting the fans, McCarthy singer Malcolm Eden for eating meat, McCarthy in general for putting out a 12" instead of a 7" (Haynes had railed against 12" singles for years by this point¹⁰⁰) and the Labour Party for 'watering down its socialism'. In stark contrast to the anarcho-punk ethos discussed in the first half of this chapter, Haynes approved of state socialism *per se*. He goes on to propose, again in contradistinction to the likes of Penny Rimbaud and Crass, that compromise

implicit undermining of masculinist ideologies, of course; the name Sarah itself being a heavy pointer in such a direction).

¹⁰⁰ Sarah treated the 7" single as a political issue/weapon, releasing nothing wider than a 7" for a remarkably prolonged period of time. The heart of the argument, as it was first formulated in *AYSTGH?*, is that 7"s are cheaper to manufacture than 12"s, use less resources, sound little inferior if at all, retail at significantly less and (the previous point was played heavily in the zine but this was the most insistent claim of its writers) have *the very essence of pop music* in their form.

can be both necessary and valid: ‘I want pure philosophical, radical thought. But we have to get the Tories out of power somehow. While they’ll still let us.’¹⁰¹

This wave of bands and fanzines, the cutie movement, was not entirely apolitical, then. Its general programme, in terms of macro-social politics, was one of infiltrating and changing the mainstream.¹⁰² It took more than ten years past the *NME*’s cassette-release *C86* to ‘get the Tories out of power’, of course. By the time that happened, the Conservatives’ main opposition party had come to resemble its old enemy enough that many have come to argue that little changed when Labour took power in 1997. In the same year, Alan McGee’s Creation records – which had put out some early Pastels records, it is worth noting – managed to get an ‘indie’ band (of a sort) to the top-most height of the UK’s music business. It had been done with the help of Sony, who bought a majority share of Creation from McGee in the early 1990s, but the band were widely described as an ‘indie’ band, and still are today. The band in question was Oasis and, as with the election of New Labour, many commentators would come to ask how much had really changed.

Presuming that the reader will have heard at least one of Oasis’s songs, with their ‘classic rock’ chord changes and familiarly-structured swagger, I turn now to a second mid-1980s song ‘Trudy is a Squeal’ by the Brilliant Corners, an indie group

¹⁰¹ *Sarah 4* zine.

¹⁰² As noted above, certain bands such as Half Man, Half Biscuit appear not to have cared much for such infiltration of the mainstream. It remains generally true, nevertheless, that the mid-1980s indie-pop scene was characterised by an urge to get records into the charts, get on *Top of the Pops*, and so on. Belief that such a thing was possible is clear in many of the fanzines from the period, many of which I have archived and used as the basis of my arguments in the present chapter.

reasonably described as a cutie band.¹⁰³ What might the fan of such a band say of the ‘indie music’ of the ‘Brit Pop’ era? That the essence of the mid-1980s indie sensibility can also be found in the hits of Blur, Oasis and so on, or that something crucial had disappeared? To approach such a question, it will be useful to examine more closely a specific piece of music in order to look for signs of experimentation or peculiarity as regards the musical formulae normal to pop and rock in general, and as compared with the Brit Pop style considered by many to be ‘indie’ music more specifically. What, we will ask, would be the political implications of greater peculiarity/experimentalism, if such a thing turns out to be apparent in this piece as compared with the later ‘indie’ music of Oasis?

*Trudy Is A Squeal.*¹⁰⁴

A rhythm guitar strums out a I-IV-iii-IV harmony at a fairly high tempo with one four-beat bar per chord position. The key being B major (with some dissonant discrepancies which I shall outline shortly), the guitarist is thus playing a B major, E major, D-sharp minor, E major sequence. The guitar seems to be cranked up fairly

¹⁰³ ‘Cutie’ is a moniker which sits uneasily on the Brilliant Corners, who were a band of much seriousness in many respects. However, later singles such as the thoroughly jaunty ‘Delilah Sands’ show that the band (possibly with a degree of opportunism) were prepared to coincide with significant elements of the ‘cutie’ sound – particularly the heavy use of ‘ba ba ba’ as a substitute for the English language in the chorus (Brilliant Corners, ‘Delilah Sands’, 12", SS20 records, SS28T, 1987). In short, it is reasonably fair to say that the Corners were kind of cute and kind of punk.

¹⁰⁴ The Brilliant Corners, ‘Trudy is a Squeal’, *Everything I Ever Wanted: June '85 to March '86*, McQueen Records, MCQLP3, 1988. The track itself was previously unreleased, but evidently had been recorded between mid-1985 and early 1986.

high on what sounds like a low-budget transistor amp. We can picture the speed of the player's arm as he fills in the semi-quavers, perhaps giving himself 'wanker's elbow' as critics of indie pop would often jibe around the time. The guitar is accompanied by a basic, garage-style drum beat: heavy on the floor tom and kick-pedal with a simple snare 'fill' to build the excitement at the fourth bar, just prior to the interjection of the other members of the band. The sleeve notes inform us that the drummer, judged by his appearance on the LP's inner sleeve, is 'still a punk' – highly old-fashioned, these 1988-written notes seem to imply of the inner sleeve picture from (way back) 1986.

As the other instruments enter the fray, the bass is notable for its disconnection from the harmony of the guitar chords (see example 2 for an approximation of the bass part in question). Over the first two bars' I-IV movement, the bassist applies the same pattern to both tonic and sub-dominant chords: a leap from a low B (the song's tonic note, in a firmly felt sense) up to the octave above with a hint of the major seventh note (A-sharp) adding some colour. Over the following two bars (iii-IV), the bassist inverts his trajectory with a pattern leading from E down to B via D-sharp.

Example 2

4-string Bass Guitar

Bass

3

The bass-line, then, acts in a dissonant form of counterpoint against the guitar part, with its two bar ascending phrase seeming to be 'answered' by the two bar descending phrase whilst moving in distinction to the guitar chords' harmonic movement. The

effect would be quite musically familiar, for the competent average listener, if it were not for one peculiarity: the prominent E-natural which falls on the first beat of the third bar. The slight dissonance created by this low E-natural against the guitar's D-sharp minor chord (iii – the relative minor of the dominant) is quickly resolved to D-sharp consequent to the shape of the bass line. Yet the 'off-note' has provided a *frisson* of otherness, a jarring hint of other musical possibilities. It is the kind of thing which any serious pop producer would quickly tidy away, by dint of the semi-tonal clash's discomfort for ears attuned to convention.

There are two further, inter-related points to note about this bass part. Firstly, the four bar phrase, heard without the guitar part, would carry no implication pointing to the I-IV-iii-IV pattern. When the ensemble is heard as a unit, however, it just about fits the harmonic structure of the verse. This is a good example of the kind of collective composition described so well by Sara Cohen in *Rock Culture in Liverpool*.¹⁰⁵ Secondly, it seems likely, therefore, that the clear statement of the harmonic structure on the rhythm guitar was a deliberate part of the band's arrangement of the song: by familiarising the listener with the I-IV-iii-IV sequence, even if only once, the group were signalling that this is the backdrop against which the bass part can, in context, make sense.¹⁰⁶ The small dissonance on the first beat of the third bar suggests a band with strong sensitivity in its use of 'wrong' notes; the album is rife with such mild

¹⁰⁵ Cohen, *Rock*, chapter 2, pp.9-20.

¹⁰⁶ The presumption has been made that the group were likely collaborative composer/arrangers on the grounds that the Brilliant Corners record sleeves, certainly in their early period, usually specified vocalist Davey Woodward only as creator of the *words*. Such collaborations would be typical for the indie bands of this period. For superb illustration of the way collaborative composition tended to occur in mid-1980s indie music, see Cohen, *Rock*, pp.9-20.

transgressions of good harmonic taste, as was the work of most of the best cutie groups.

To sum up, this bass playing is very melodic yet slightly dissonant. It is a fairly classic example of the approach to bass guitar in mid-1980s indie groups, with a heavy debt to punk's stylistic pioneer of simple but effective melodic counterpoint on the electric bass, Peter Hook of Joy Division/New Order.

The second guitar, like the bass, is standard for its era: two notes 'jangled' out on the 'skinny' strings, the amplifier sounding as if its treble knob is turned to the maximum, giving a little harmonic support to the rhythm guitar and a little rhythmic support to the drummer's hi-hats. Interestingly, the guitarist's two-part ostinato seems to imply a I-IV-I-IV harmony, although the notes from the third bar simply colour the first guitar's iii chord with a natural 6th harmony – again showing how imperative it is for the listener to have been made aware in the opening bars that I-IV-iii-IV is in fact the principal harmonic progression (D-sharp minor add 6 [B-natural] being a pleasing chord for most listeners with a little sense of harmonic structure, whether or not they know the note- or chord-names).¹⁰⁷

As the piece moves into its chorus, the harmonic progression shifts to a I-V- ♭ VII-IV pattern underscored with a simple but pleasing trumpet part. This inclusion of modal harmony makes an interesting cross reference for comparison with the Crass and Conflict songs discussed above: again, there is something ungainly about the shift

¹⁰⁷ It is likely that at least one member of the Brilliant Corners (the trumpeter, one suspects) was a fan of jazz, *Brilliant Corners* being the title of an album by Thelonius Monk.

down to the \flat VII position and yet it is clearly pleasing to a significantly sized audience. Given its regular appearance in punk and post-punk chord sequences (as well as other forms of pop and rock), there is something intriguing about its commonality; an argument could be made, indeed, that from the 1960s onwards (and earlier, in the blues), the dissonance of the \flat VII chord has effectively become felt as a consonance (I shall return to this idea in the thesis conclusion below).

Turning to the song's lyrics, certain themes leap out. The singer is poor ('I can't afford to wash myself or even buy a meal'), something of an intellectual with (lapsed) catholic tastes ('all I ever wanted was a room, some books and Trudy') and a general lack of interest in the purchasing of commodities which 'offer me nothing [and are] out of touch'. With his way of life, the singer doesn't even 'need any of that pop fizz', beguilingly enough. The anti-commodification sentiment is really brought home in the song's final lines:

How many cars can you fit in the yard?

And how many fridges can you fit in the kitchen?

How many curlers can you put in your hair?

And how many turkeys do you think you can eat?

It seems, then, that the singer is somewhat Left-minded ('ever since I was seventeen I hated all those Right-wing scenes') if slightly jaded about the possibility of a better society ('idealists always dream and cry into their pillows' – a typically 'unmanly' cutie lyric). His main pre-occupation, however, is clearly Trudy, the song's

namesake.¹⁰⁸ He loves her (he wants her in his room, along with the books, and she is a ‘squeal’ – a scream of joy – after all) but he ‘ought to run a mile’ since she ‘whine[s] all day’. As with many Brilliant Corners songs, Davey Woodward (singer and lyric-writer) here gives the feeling of the classic British working-class ‘kitchen sink’ environment: he is poor, he is constrained by his circumstances with a quixotic girlfriend (‘your funny face, your funny smile’) who wants multiple fridges for her kitchen. From the reference to Nell Dunn (author of *Poor Cow*) in the accompanying sleeve-notes alone, it is fair to say that there are signs of a strong interest in the working class experience and certainly this was the class from which Woodward hailed.¹⁰⁹

Section Summary

The cutie scene, from around 1986, supplemented the existing traditions of punk by introducing hitherto suppressed pre-first wave influences from ‘the sixties’. They also eschewed much of the dissonance and harshness of not only the anarcho-punk tradition but also the FWPP groups (described by Reynolds as ‘postpunk’).

Nevertheless, certain elements of dissonance remained prominent in some cutie-orientated music, as is emphasised in the analysis of the Brilliant Corners’ ‘Trudy is a

¹⁰⁸ The title ‘Trudy is a Squeal’ actually recalls the Ramones quite strongly (‘Sheena is a Punk Rocker’; ‘Judy is a Punk’; and so on). The drum part on ‘Trudy’ also suggests that the Corners may have been fans of ‘Da Brudders’.

¹⁰⁹ Davey Woodward has stated that he and the Corners’ bassist ‘had working class chips on our shoulders’, *Bristol Archive Records* website’s section on *Bristol Post Punk 1977 Onwards*, <http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/bands.html#BrilliantCorners>. It is fair to say that this ‘chip’ is apparent in many of his lyrics in the Brilliant Corners.

Squeal'. Other cutie groups emphasised a certain amateurishness and somewhat childishness, which may have been consciously performed, as is suggested by the analysis of the Pastels song 'I Wonder Why'. Despite (or, better, in addition to) the differences from earlier traditions of punk, prime movers within the cutie scene nevertheless clearly conceived the movement as a continuation from punk, hence *AYSTGH?* fanzine's many references to 'punk rock' and Amelia Fletcher's Ramones-invoking 'Hey Ho, Let's Go!' sticker discussed above. Politically, the cutie scene brought issues of elitism within the indie movement to the fore, with a problematic desire to infiltrate and/or change the mainstream. Many cuties also demonstrated an explicit commitment to socialism more so than to the anarchism espoused by many within earlier traditions of punk.

iv. Conclusion

By the end of the 1980s, the post-punk scene of guitar-based bands in the UK had dwindled to a shadow of its former self (selves). (By ‘post-punk’ here, to re-iterate the point, I mean ‘punk-related music in the years after punk’s first wave’, thus including both Crass *and* the Pastels; *not* FWPP – see above – as delimited by Simon Reynolds, in other words). Anarcho-punk would continue to thrive in certain locations, such as Bradford’s *lin12* Club and squat venues all over Europe, but has never since regained the kind of critical mass it commanded in the early 1980s. Many of the principles it promoted still hold significant currency, however, and many people still listen to this music.¹¹⁰ Yet its new-sense status was essentially finished by the mid-1980s, with a marked lack of interest in the world outside its microcosm thereafter and a distinct conservatism with regard to its musical content. This is not to say necessarily that a feeling of justice could no longer be attained within its confines, nor that its lack of apparent novelty necessarily evaporated its political efficacy: the anarcho-punk tradition remained important for its participants and, furthermore, offered a degree of wider political influence in the 1990s and onwards, if George McKay is to be believed

¹¹⁰ For an auto-biographical example, I worked for the first half of 2003 in a Catholic primary school in Gateshead. One day I found myself on the same Metro train as another teacher with whom I naturally struck up a conversation. When I asked him what kind of music he was into, he revealed (with pronounced sheepish-ness) that ‘I still like me punk stuff’. Surprised to find a fellow enthusiast, he revealed that he had seen Crass in ’83 and particularly liked the Mob and Zounds. Though the staff room in a Catholic primary school might not be an obvious place to find admirers of anarcho-punk, the fact that here were two working in one small school might at least suggest that not all anarcho-punk ‘fans’ have remained as the ‘rejects of society’ which Crass once (semi-proudly, it should be remembered) claimed to be.

(see previous chapters). But after Crass's dissolution, anarcho-punk came to function more as a tradition comfortable with its own status *as* tradition, rather than as a new-sense perhaps capable of some micromatic empowerment.

The 'indie-pop' idea, meanwhile, which had come out of the mid-1980s cutie scene, splintered in the UK in the early 1990s between a mainstream 'indie' scene and an extremely underground fanzine scene of which Sarah records was the leading light. The music released by the latter often bore many similarities to the Pastels' song analysed above, 'I Wonder Why': simple chords, clumsy performance values (perhaps consciously so) and lyrics with vague political inferences if any. By the early 1990s, however, the 'diehard' cutie groups brought little if any new-sense to the punk tradition, with the kind of dissonance identified above in the Brilliant Corners' 'Trudy is a Squeal' rarely if ever appearing in the later cutie-associated indie pop. Dwindling to a tiny handful of enthusiasts who could be seen at Heavenly gigs around the UK in the very early 1990s, the UK Riot Grrrl movement of around 1992-4 saw some resuscitation for elements of the earlier, cutie period as well as aspects of the still earlier anarcho-punk scene, as we shall see.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ My own recollections of the dwindling of the cutie scene by the early 1990s were strongly confirmed by informal discussions between 2006 and 2008 with key agents of the scene such as Amelia Fletcher and fellow Heavenly member Peter Momtchiloff, ex-Huggy Bear member and long term enthusiast of certain cutie groups Jon Slade, notable fanzine writer, gig promoter and record label owner Chris Phillips (of Piao! and Chocolate Narcotic), acknowledged key player in the transition from the cutie scene to the riot grrrl scene Rachel Holborow, Gary Walker of Wiiiija Records (which issued many records by key cutie/riot grrrl crossover group Huggy Bear), Sean Price of the Fortuna Pop label (who is self-acknowledged as having been one such early 1990s cutie diehard, before he went on to run what is almost certainly the UK's most significant cutie-orientated post-1980s record label, home to

The mainstream version of ‘indie’ music, on the other hand, grew rapidly from around 1989 onwards. In the first instance, the ‘Madchester’ movement brought Manchester-based groups such as Stone Roses, Happy Mondays, Inspiral Carpets, James, 808 State and others into the charts, on to *TOTP* and beyond the confines of the indie sector as it had been established since the late 1970s. Musically, this involved a curtailment of the kinds of dissonance and amateurism identified in the case studies above, and a movement towards shuffle rhythms, loping bass figures and other elements of the ‘indie/dance’ crossover sound. This was followed by the ‘Brit Pop’ scene of the mid-1990s, centred around groups such as Pulp, Blur and Oasis.

The last-named group were, in a strong sense, the culmination of the rehabilitation of sixties music by the cutie groups. Oasis’s manager Alan McGee had released records by the Pastels and similar groups on his Creation label in the mid-1980s, and had certainly influenced fanzines like *AYSTGH?* and record labels like Sarah. But where the cutie groups had retained a certain commitment to the principle of economic independence and a degree of awkward harmonic dissonance, Oasis issued recordings on McGee’s Creation label – majority-owned by Sony from the early 1990s onwards – with a sound which seemed to hark back to rock’s ‘golden years’ without a shred of irony nor with any apparent misgivings about the effective regurgitation of supposed past glories (quite the contrary, indeed). For Oasis, creating a simulacrum of the

cutie-style bands such as the Pains of Being Pure at Heart), John Jervis (of the Where It’s At Is Where You Are label, named after a song by riot grrrl group Huggy Bear and issuing many contemporary groups in the vein of the late 1980s-early 1990s cutie scene in which he participated as an enthusiast) and others.

Beatles' salience became the ultimate goal, it seems. Admittedly Pulp, usually described as a Brit Pop band, produced a sound which was rather distinct from previous periods of UK pop, but the bulk of the bands associated with the Brit Pop tag had little if any interest in creating any new-sense. Rather, competition for total sales dominance became an explicit aim, as is reflected in the infamous 1995 battle between Blur and Oasis for the top of the charts: one band's hit sounds like the Kinks or perhaps Madness, the other like Status Quo; neither would have sounded much out of place in the Hit Parade of, say, 1980.

What were the political implications of this movement towards a post-punk music stripped of the desire for a new-sense? Did any aspiration for a certain micromatic justice remain? Perhaps Tony Blair's invitation to Oasis's Gallagher brothers invitation for cocktails at Downing St. in 1997 says as much as is required. Something, doubtless, was gained by some section of society when New Labour gained power and the New Indie music (or old, packaged pop/rock music, as some might say) topped the charts. It seems certain, however, that a significant body of people within British society felt that justice was far from having been done thereby. Indeed, though Oasis have often been argued to show an influence from the Sex Pistols, it is hard to think of the famous pictures of Blair and Noel Gallagher sipping champagne together as some ultimate picture of the success of punk nor, for that matter, of socialism: quite the opposite, it seems likely that many would say.

Perhaps, however, the cuties' ostensible desire for a take-over of the mainstream by the indie underground was *always* doomed to an ironic failure-in-success (the cuties' marrying of a broadly socialistic aspiration, as evidenced above, with an anarchistic

inheritance from earlier traditions of punk, as evidenced in the 1980s 'indie' aspiration for independence from the mainstream: a mutual contradiction, it seems, which could only lead to success-in-failure or failure-in-success). Perhaps the resistance to taking power enacted by Crass, a certain recoil, *was* their success; a success which needed no critical mass nor vanguard leadership to be a success. Indeed, perhaps an attempt to reject power (rather than 'resisting' it, in the normal sense) was punk's special contribution to twentieth century culture. If so, it can hardly be said that Oasis's rise was some culmination of the punk movement. Tony Blair was very much a pragmatist and to that extent was akin to Stalin, whose greatest contribution to socialist doctrine was the perversion of Marxism falling under the rubric 'socialism in one country'. Mr. Blair's companions Oasis were a success, but though their music was almost insultingly simple, their operational tendencies worked most contrarily to the promise that anyone can do it. The 1990s indie scene, then, although it grew in large part from the late 1980s cutie scene, was something of a betrayal of the punk underground which, earlier in the 1980s, had been so politically charged by the anarcho-punk scene. The seeds of this betrayal would seem to have taken root in the cutie scene precisely on account of its desire, as described above, to break with a central tenet of the punk underground project: independence from the mainstream.

A critical punk underground persevered in the margins of the 1990s, nevertheless; it continues to suggest that anyone can do it today. It has greater legitimacy in suggesting such a principle, one might want to say, by dint of its micromatic spread of power (if you're an underground punk band, the fact that you sold fewer records than Blur probably confirms that you did something right; if you only sold four records,

maybe if you only sold one, it was probably still worth doing it: such is typical of the rhetoric of the punk underground). I proceed in the next chapter, therefore, with an examination of later moments in the punk movement as it rolled onwards from the sub-events I have sketched here. What power, we will ask, was found/held/spread in the 1990s forms of punk? What continuities were maintained, and what breaches brought forth? Which were the changes to the underground/mainstream dichotomy as the punk tradition was confronted with post-Soviet historical and cultural developments?

Chapter Four: The Continuation of a Beginning

Punk is a tradition in the sense that there have been bands and individuals which have identified themselves as punk for a substantial period of time. Over more than a quarter of a century, punk has had consistent features within this tradition. Principal amongst these features, in the punk underground at least, have been operational tendencies towards economic independence and an aspiration towards having no stars, no heroes and no leaders: anyone can do it, punks will often claim, as we have seen. In the late 1970s, punk rock claimed that it had delivered a year zero; yet, as was shown in the previous chapter, it in fact drew upon and built itself upon several anterior traces: it was necessarily linked to other, earlier traditions, in other words. In the early 1980s, the UK anarcho-punk scene took the anarchistic aspiration towards having no leaders remarkably far; yet Crass, the reluctant leaders of the scene, eventually found that this aspiration made it necessary to retreat from power and to give up upon the authority they had gained. Later in the 1980s, and also in the UK, the cutie scene held faith that their significantly independent 'indie' pop could take their form of punk into the hit parade and the mainstream, yet the cutie bands instead descended into obscurity whilst what became known as indie music became almost entirely dissociated from the ideal of economic independence.

The punk tradition, then, changed significantly with each supplementation and by the end of the 1980s had successively shown that the empowerment its new-ness appeared to bring for individuals could not be sustained without betrayal of the ideals of having no leaders and of maintaining social and economic independence. The purpose of the present chapter is to explore post-1980s traditions of punk, especially

those which have developed in North America in the 1990s, with some effort towards the end of the chapter to place this in a wider historical and cultural context (as hinted at the close of the previous chapter). I begin by briefly examining the essentially paradigm-shifting rise of punk in the US mainstream in late 1991, which can be seen as the single most important development in punk since the late 1970s. I go on to discuss the riot grrrl scene of the early 1990s which began in the US and presented itself as very much being part of the punk tradition though, simultaneously, it seems to have wanted to define itself against the 1990s mainstreaming of punk. The riot grrrls particularly encouraged, as the cuties before them in the UK had, amateur musicianship and the idea that anyone can do it. The math rock movement, which I also discuss at length in this chapter, was likewise an identifiable response to the rise of ‘mainstream punk’ circa 1991, with a notable commitment to economic independence as an operational tendency. Unlike riot grrrl, however, math rock musicianship was highly advanced and has been compared to the early 1970s ‘prog rock’ style. This advanced musicianship challenged conceptions of what the musical content of punk could be; yet math rock effectively re-focused attention on the economic conditions of the music’s production in the manner which punk underground traditions consistently have. The dexterity of math rock musicians may have thus undermined the idea that anyone can do it which, since the late 1970s, had been a cornerstone of the traditions of punk; arguably, however, they remained punk in their operational tendency towards specific elements of economic independence.

i. Still Birth?

It is August 1991, I am twenty years old and wandering through a fairly muddy field towards the main stage at the Reading Festival, accompanied by several friends. We are about to watch the band whose first album has been in fairly constant rotation at our set of tents. We bump into some other friends from Sunderland (where I am living at the time) who are very excited about seeing the band too, claiming to have made the trip down here to the south of England purely because they wanted to see this band play live. Overall, indeed, the atmosphere is one of high expectation down here in front of the stage.

I don't remember what songs were played in what order – many were unfamiliar tracks from their soon-to-be-released second album – but I do remember the excitement of seeing a ferocious group playing with about as much intensity as any I had seen. There is a scantily-clad male dancer cavorting throughout, lending a 'gay' vibe, as they say. But they are powerful ('rockin'') and as I recall I am very swept up in their performance, despite reservations about their occasional 'Heavy Metal'-ish musical elements. The bassist is enormous, about seven feet tall by the look of him. He repeatedly whips off his instrument in order to throw it high in the air only to catch it, strap it back on, and continue playing. One throw is misjudged and the body of the heavy-looking bass cracks him in the head. He picks it up and continues playing anyway, staggering a little.

The guitarist has a good scream on him, I think to myself. He is wearing a brown, real-leather coat and has badly bleached hair. I get a closer look at him when he jumps

down in to the photographer's pit, just inches from the audience barrier. He wanders about a bit, leans back on to the crowd, almost near enough to touch – but why would I care about that? Not that I'm truly above being awe-struck by the indie-famous. Indeed, I feel a rush of excitement when Sonic Youth's main-man Thurston Moore suddenly rushes from the wings to reach a hand down and help the guitarist back on to the stage. Now he *is* famous, in '91; the biggest name in the punk underground, it is fair to say.¹ I'm not displeased to be so close to the group, then. It's just that this blond guitarist guy is really just another guy in a band, as far as I'm concerned. Most of the gigs I've seen in the previous two or three years have featured performers literally rubbing shoulders with the crowd. It's not unusual, in the punk underground, nor even in the realms of stadium rock for which the Reading Festival offers some form of simulacrum.²

Nirvana, the group whose performance I am describing, will become 'mega-stars' mere weeks later. In August '91, however, they are little noted and little known, outside of the punk underground. Personally speaking, I am far more awestruck when Eugene Kelly of cutie group the Vaselines ambles on stage, with a satchel over his

¹ At the moment in question, however, Sonic Youth had not long-since signed to the major label Geffen, rendering them no longer eligible for the 'punk-underground' tag as defined in chapter one, strictly speaking.

² One only has to think of U2's performance at *Live Aid* in 1985, for example: vocalist Bono jumped from the Wembley Stadium stage to dance with an audience member. Apparently an impressive act of spontaneity, the selection of a female fan for a mid-song dancing session was in fact a standard part of U2's performance at this time, and was by 1991 a standard method of creating the appearance of intimacy between band and audience, even when the audience was extremely numerous (which, by punk underground standards, Reading Festival audiences certainly were at this time).

shoulder, to offer guest vocals for one song. The Vaselines had been one of my absolute favourite bands during the late 1980s, and the fact that Eugene had also been a sometime member of the Pastels adds to his (anti-)hero status in my and my then-girlfriend's eyes – though the majority of the crowd would not have thought so, I imagine.³ Eugene sings the Vaselines' (non-)hit song 'Molly's Lips' in harmony with Nirvana's vocalist then wanders off.

The band plays some more songs as a three-piece. In the end, the bass player hurls his instrument at the drummer and the pair of them also amble off. The blond-haired guitarist is left strumming alone, with his feet balancing himself on the very edge of the stage. It's a long drop and the guitarist looks precariously balanced, but strangely calm. His posture seems to casually declare, 'what would I care about falling off this stage to death or injury?' He strums some more, staring into the middle distance, then eventually turns on his heels and runs full tilt at the drumkit, leaping in the air and landing bang on top of the cymbals and toms. According to music press reports the following week, his arm is broken in the process. Despite the injury, he manages to give us a wave before being the last to wander off that big stage. Punk rock, I may justifiably have exclaimed out loud. In other words, I am impressed.

³ The Vaselines were virtually unknown in the UK at this time, having only released two singles and an album which one had to scour the shops to find even when it was supposedly in print. For long-term fans such as myself, the UK music press's tendency to claim, once Nirvana's cover versions and heaped praise had made the Vaselines well known, that they had always championed the band was rather annoying. I had been a regular reader of the 'inkies' for some years by this point, and knew therefore that mentions (positive or otherwise, mostly the latter) of cutie-punk bands such as the Vaselines and the Pastels had been virtually non-existent prior to 1991. Subsequent to praise from Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, however, this situation soon changed.

In the ensuing months, many parts of the media would try to sell Nirvana as the new Sex Pistols. There is some sense in the comparison, despite the former's obvious supplementary differences from the latter. As with the Pistols, many young people heard Nirvana on the radio and saw them on television in 1991 and felt that a whole new set of possibilities had arrived. The band kindled feelings that, once again, were associated with the term punk. People were inspired to form bands, change their haircuts, track down obscure records cited by the band; trivial gestures, perhaps, but a new-sense similar to that which the earlier waves of punk had delivered in decades gone by. Even those who, like me, had already been into punk/indie/underground/alternative music for many years were likely to find some appeal in the band's music. Personally, I continued to insist, for deliberate effect, that I preferred the Vaselines to Nirvana, and did not buy *Nevermind* (the band's sophomore album, which came out shortly after the performance described above) on principle. The principle in question was the fact that the album was released by Geffen, a major label. Such reservations were not widespread, in the mainstream of youth culture, however, and the album sold with amazing rapidity and in extraordinary quantities despite a sales forecast of around 150,000 (this being the figure which Sonic Youth's *Goo* had sold the previous year, on the same label). Famously, it would displace Michael Jackson from the top of the US album chart before the year was out, selling more than 10 million copies in the first years of the 1990s. Nirvana had one big difference from all previous punk-orientated precedents, therefore: their records sold like the proverbial hot cakes.

Punk, in the 1990s, was framed by the extraordinary sales success of *Nevermind*.⁴ According to many media reports of the day, a new kind of music was now visible in the mainstream. The tag the media applied to this new music, punk, had been used before of course, but other tags such as ‘slacker’, ‘grunge’ and ‘generation x’ with perhaps more legitimate claims to novelty were also applied to a large body of youth culture. It was widely claimed that a broad and significant cultural shift had taken place, with the new generation perceived to be as distinct from the 1980s as the 1970s punks had been from the hippies of the 1960s. (A reader who balks at this distinction on the grounds that the grunge bands had been active in the 1980s should recall that many significant agents of 1970s punk, such as Malcolm McLaren, Genesis P. Orridge and the Red Krayola, had been active in the 1960s.) Nirvana have had almost as many books written about them as the Sex Pistols have, but it is not the purpose of this chapter to dissect nor review such literature. As with chapter three, the purpose is rather to suggest something of what led up to and followed Nirvana’s rise, and what constitutes the political and philosophical significances of the subsequent 1990s supplementations of the punk trace. The riot grrrl scene provides my first case study. As with all sub-movements within the punk underground (as defined in chapter one), we will see that the promise *anyone can do it* remained centrally important in this scene.

⁴ For more on this process, see Oakes, *Slanted*, pp.12-13, where she argues that ‘In the aftermath of [Nirvana and] grunge, indie went back to its grassroots beginnings’. If she is correct that the result was ‘a new kind of indie culture’, it would seem self-evident that Nirvana’s influence went all the way down to the indie underground.

Comparably to the relationship of Crass and the Sex Pistols, the riot grrrl-orientated bands were no straightforward addendum to an antecedence provided by Nirvana, as should become clear below.⁵ On the contrary, and perhaps even more obviously than in the relationship between Crass and the Pistols, the riot grrrls were responding to (and were, in a sense therefore, products of) certain socio-political forces which arguably also generated the Nirvana phenomenon. The obviousness to which I refer derives from the fact that members of Bikini Kill (the single most important riot grrrl-orientated group, without question) were in fact flatmates and sometime lovers of members of Nirvana in the months leading up to the latter's breakthrough single 'Smells Like Teen Spirit' in 1991. Indeed, Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill provided the name for the latter song by graffiti-ing the phrase 'Kurt smells like teen spirit' on a wall in Olympia, Washington, the small town where Bikini Kill's Tobi Vail and her boyfriend Kurt Cobain were living at that time.⁶

Though Nirvana and Bikini Kill came from the same *milieu* and were influenced by much of the same (punk) music as each other, however, there can be little doubt that the former affected the reception (and, therefore, the meaning) of the latter's work. This is because, very shortly after the Reading Festival performance I have described above (and for many years thereafter, probably right up the present day, indeed), *Nevermind's* extraordinary sales success made a global impact upon the music scene right down to the micro-communities of the underground from which Nirvana had

⁵ I will refer in this chapter to riot grrrl-orientated groups in respect of the fact that many key groups, including prime movers Bikini Kill, consistently resisted being described outright as a 'riot grrrl group'. It seems fairer, therefore, to describe them as being riot grrrl-orientated, since at least two members were crucial to the development of riot grrrl, as we will see.

⁶ See True, *Nirvana*, p.226 for more detail on this.

sprung. For the riot grrrl-orientated bands, and for many others who wished to keep punk underground, the idea of *mainstream punk* was an oxymoron. Given that punk was being discussed throughout the mainstream media in the early 1990s, however, the alleged oxymoron could not simply be wished away. Whether or not Bikini Kill had been Nirvana's sometime peers, therefore, they (and the riot grrrl bands with which they were affiliated) operated post-*Nevermind* in a *de facto* sense. It is hard not to see, indeed, that many of the riot grrrls' most extreme resistances to the dominance of the mainstream were necessitated precisely by the fact that mainstream punk seemed to be everywhere from 1991 onwards.⁷ In a sense, the riot grrrls were therefore saying, 'Never Mind the Bollocks, Never Mind *Nevermind*, Here's Our Grrrl-music'. Certainly, it was another re-birth of punk.

⁷ Hence the fact that Alan O'Connor's highly detailed study of *Punk Record Labels* reports firmly that 1990s underground punk was actually more determinedly independent than its 1980s predecessor, contrary to what many would expect.

ii. The Arrival of a New, Renegade, Girl-Boy Hyper-Nation: Riot Grrrl

A movement formed by a handful of girls who felt empowered, who were angry, hilarious, and extreme through and for each other. Built on the floors of strangers' living rooms, tops of Xerox machines, snail mail, word of mouth and mixtapes, *riot grrrl reinvented punk*. It, as with any legit movement, has a strong aesthetic that the 1990s would be nothing without.⁸

Though the claim that movements require strong aesthetics in order to gain legitimacy is dubious in the extreme⁹, it is quite true that the riot grrrl movement was of vital importance to the 1990s as a whole. For example, the 1991 proclamation from the canonical grrrl-band Bikini Kill that 'we want revolution, girl-style, now' has an obvious echo in the Spice Girls' calls for 'girl power' much later in the decade. The enormously increased popularity of tattooing and piercing amongst women in the 1990s, meanwhile, was very likely significantly influenced by the pictures of 'angry grrrls' which were printed in newspapers and mainstream magazines all over Europe and America in the early years of the decade. Riot grrrl, though feminist in an obvious and definite sense, influenced and was influenced by what is known as 'post-feminist' politics. 'I can sell my body if I wanna', Bikini Kill sang, on the grounds that 'god knows you've already sold your mind'; not so very far, it is fair to say, from the kinds

⁸ Beth Ditto of the Gossip, foreword to Monem, *Riot Grrrl*, emphasis added.

⁹ The Chartists in the Nineteenth Century, for example, were hardly imaginative aestheticians yet this can hardly be said to prevent them from being a 'legit movement'.

of justifications any number of scantily-clad 1990s and 21st-century girl-groups and female models might make.¹⁰

Riot grrrl reinvented punk, as the writer states. But then, punk – like anything – is re-invented every time it appears. Riot grrrl also has been re-invented numerous times, with the Ladyfest tradition (in which music by women and women-centred bands is brought together and celebrated in localised mini-festivals) bringing a large element of the riot grrrl approach in to the twenty first century. The bands and individuals which first called themselves riot grrrls in the 1990s would probably recognise and approve of the Ladyfest scene – indeed, the very first Ladyfest heavily involved one of the key agents of the Riot Grrrl movement, Alison Wolfe of Bratmobile, with subsequent Ladyfests across Europe and North America having involved many ex-grrrls as organisers and performers.

A contrasting consequence of Riot Grrrl is the commercialised poppy punk song ‘Riot Girl’ by Good Charlotte, which begins with the lines

she's got tattoos, and piercings,
she likes Minor Threat, she likes Social Distortion,

¹⁰ The words ‘we’re Bikini Kill and we want revolution girl style now!’ provide the opening call-to-arms on their 1992 eponymously-named mini-album (*Bikini Kill*, Kill Rock Stars, KRS 204, 1992). The lyrics ‘I can sell my body...’, etc., derive from their song ‘Jigsaw Youth’ (*Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah*, Catcall, PUSS001LP, 1993. This was a ‘split’ LP with Bikini Kill’s title only applying to one side; the flip side was Huggy Bear’s, separately titled as *Our Troubled Youth* but sharing the same catalogue number).

my girl's a hot girl,
 a hood rat who needs an attitude adjustment

and goes on to systematically re-affirm the social norms against which the early 1990s grrrls had striven.¹¹ Good Charlotte use the conventional spelling of the word 'girl' for this song, thus it is possible that the song's title is a co-incidence with no direct relation to the punk underground scene about which I am writing here. Given the lyrical references to bands from that *milieu* (Social Distortion and, paradigmatically, Minor Threat), however, it seems certain that, on some level, Good Charlotte's song was addressed to the grrrls who had radicalised the US punk scene ten years earlier.

In recent years, songs such as this have made the name 'riot grrrl' something of a contested ground. (Being 'a hot girl', for example, would hardly be the desire of the typical attendee of a Ladyfest event, and it is clear therefore that the term riot grrrl has multiple legacies, some of which would appear to contradict each other.) Mavis Bayton, for example, like many other researchers who have commented upon riot grrrl, has correctly noted that there is a case for defining a band such as the UK's Voodoo Queens as riot grrrls (despite the fact that they 'refused the term') on the

¹¹ Thus he goes on to repeatedly refer to the riot girl as 'my girl' and 'my baby' who would 'do anything for me'; her rage is inarticulate and universal ('she's pissed off at everyone'), rather than being focussed on the definite targets which groups such as Bikini Kill directed themselves towards; and so on. Good Charlotte, 'Riot Girl', *Young and the Hopeless*, Epic, 86486, 2002. Epic is also a major label, of course, of which the riot grrrls would certainly have disapproved. The body images of young women in the accompanying video, doubtless, would send riot grrrls apoplectic with rage.

grounds that they have been ‘commonly called’ riot grrrls.¹² Likewise, there are reasonable grounds for Carson, Lewis and Shaw to refer to Sleater Kinney as a riot grrrl ‘crossover band’, since they are an all-female group with a sound which many would identify as being ‘indie’ and ‘punk’ orientated (they also feature a member, Corin Tucker, who had been in one of the most central riot grrrl groups, Heavens to Betsy, from 1991 to ’94).¹³ Despite this connection, however, there is a need to distinguish between Sleater Kinney (riot grrrl, arguably) and Heavens to Betsy (riot grrrl, without argument) simply because the ‘insider’ agents of the punk underground often have made and do make such a distinction.¹⁴ Sleater Kinney, for the latter constituency, might not be described as riot grrrl, therefore. Likewise Voodoo

¹² Bayton, Mavis, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.76. Bayton writes sensitively about such issues of contention, acknowledging the difficulty she experienced in gaining information on the scene. She should not be viewed too harshly, therefore, for some dating errors she makes (Huggy Bear were ejected from television’s *The Word* in March 1993, not 1992; Huggy Bear’s ‘Her Jazz’ came out in 1993, not 1991; the latter band never referred to 1991 as ‘year zero’; and so on, all on p.71), though the errors are nevertheless worth rectifying here.

¹³ Carson, Mina, Lewis, Tisa, Shaw, Susan M., *Girls Rock!: Fifty Years of Women Making Music* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), p.91.

¹⁴ Heavens to Betsy were a committed part of the riot grrrl scene which rejected on principle the offer of an interview with the IPC-owned giant of the UK music scene *NME* when on a UK tour which I organised for them in 1994. Corin Tucker’s later band Sleater Kinney, by contrast, have not identified themselves as closely with riot grrrl, and have appeared on mainstream television and in all the mainstream music magazines. This is not necessarily an attempt to place any value judgement upon the latter band: Sleater Kinney have sold many hundreds of thousands of records as a result, have managed the rare feat of making a good living from playing music and deserve praise for widening the musical palette within the rock/pop mainstream of America and Europe. Their connections with major label affiliates Matador and Sub Pop alone, however, would doubtless provoke criticism from the staunchest wing of the punk underground as described in chapter one.

Queens, since they appeared on television and other mainstream media during the period when riot grrrl was being ‘hyped’; media appearances the like of which several of the riot grrrl groups I discuss here actively declined on principle.

These nuances notwithstanding, I retain the name riot grrrl in the present chapter since the most well-known bands identified as riot grrrl upheld the principal values of the punk underground (identified in chapter one above) and, therefore, was very much a continuation of the anarchistic/underground traditions of punk I am studying in this thesis. I offer now some historical information with regard to riot grrrl, beginning with the US developments which were the antecedents of the UK riot grrrl scene.

Unlike 1970s punk, this debt of the UK riot grrrl scene to its US precursor is uncontested. Certain writers, that said, have finessed this by acknowledging that some key players in the UK scene – myself included – had had some prior involvement in the UK’s cutie scene which fed into the riot grrrl scene in a definite way.¹⁵ Useful

¹⁵ Thus Simon Reynolds and Joy Press have rightly noted riot grrrl’s ‘historical links with the British late ’80s movement of “shambling” bands (also known as the “cutie” scene for its cult of innocence)’ (*The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock’n’Roll* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995). Amelia Fletcher (vocalist, guitarist and songwriter for Talulah Gosh, Heavenly and other cutie-orientated bands), in an informal conversation at her house around 1993, told me that Chris from Huggy Bear was ‘Talulah Gosh’s biggest fan’. For a surprisingly detailed account of the role that Slampt (the record label which I co-ran with Rachel Holborow) played in the movement from cutie to riot grrrl, see Cazz Blaze’s essay ‘Poems on the Underground’ (in Monem, *Riot Grrrl*, pp.52-99). Blaze suggest that our group Pussycat Trash’s debut EP ‘pin-points very clearly the point where a love of twee pop met the punk ethic Holborow and Dale were able to build on in establishing the Slampt Underground Organisation’ (p.84) (Pussycat Trash, *Chocolate Narcotic*, ‘Plink Plonk Pink Punk’, CHOC 003, 1992). In fact, we were far from alone in moving from a cutie orientation to a riot grrrl one, with the greater bulk of Huggy Bear’s early audience deriving from such a switch, I would argue. Indeed, the first time I saw Huggy Bear, in

though this observation is, it remains certain that the US riot grrrl scene provided the principal tinder for the later developments in the UK. This ‘original’ riot-grrrl scene is normally associated with two particular geographical locations, Olympia, Washington on the west coast and Washington D.C. in the east. The attribution is appropriate enough, but it is important to emphasise – in keeping with my research here overall – that nothing comes from a vacuum.

*East Coast, West Coast, I Think I Hate Them Both...*¹⁶

There was a time in America when there was absolutely no network. But then labels like SST and Black Flag and Dead Kennedys and Alternative Tentacles [all in California] and Minor Threat and Dischord [in DC] basically created the network in America. Which a label like Kill Rock Stars... by the time we started, that network already existed so it was much easier than it had been for SST and Dischord. Because Black Flag and Minor Threat toured a lot, especially Black Flag because they did it for years, but they had to... in every

December 1991, I recognised members of the band from a Pastels gig I had attended earlier that year. Mathew Fletcher of cutie legends Talulah Gosh was the original bass player in Huggy Bear, furthermore. It is also worth mentioning that members of Bikini Kill were vociferously enthusiastic about cutie groups such as Shop Assistants when they stayed at my house in 1996. Another key player in the earliest developments of US riot grrrl, Lois Maffeo, told me that she came to the UK around 1986 and was highly impressed by cutie zines and the attendant scene.

¹⁶ Frumpies, ‘Intertube Tomorrow’, *Babies and Bunnies* EP, Kill Rock Stars, KRS 213, 1994.

city they had to find a new place to play, and nobody had ever played there, you know? They had to find every Mason's Lodge or gymnasium...¹⁷

So explained Slim Moon to me in a fanzine interview conducted in a London café in 1995. Slim's record label, Kill Rock Stars, was entirely central to the riot grrrl scene, releasing key records from Bikini Kill, Huggy Bear, Heavens to Betsy, Bratmobile and several other relevant groups, as well as related later bands such as Sleater Kinney, Lungleg, Erase Errata and New Bloods.¹⁸ His emphasis on the debt to the punk scene's forebears is clear: Kill Rock Stars, and therefore implicitly riot grrrl overall, was able to spread rapidly across the US because of a network of connections between multiple micro-scenes. These connections had been built up over more than a decade prior to the first uses of the descriptor riot grrrl in 1991. Riot grrrl, in other words, was supplementary to a pre-existing punk underground; the former was dependent upon the latter, but also was different from the trace upon which it built.

This pre-existing US punk scene was often intensely macho, as can be gleaned from Steven Blush's *American Hardcore: A Tribal Account*.¹⁹ The sub-title is well chosen,

¹⁷ *Fast Connection* fanzine #1, Dale, Pete, Holborow, Rachel, et al, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 1995, p.30.

¹⁸ Each of these later bands has shown enthusiasm for individual groups associated with riot grrrl, but it is doubtful that any would actually describe their groups as riot grrrl bands or themselves as riot grrrls. I base this observation on conversations with all the bands mentioned.

¹⁹ For general reading on riot grrrl and its significance within the wider punk scene, a good source with entertainingly mythological tendencies is Gina Arnold's *Route 666*. For more specific reading, see Monem, especially the excellent chapters by Julia Downes and by Cazz Blaze which are the most

for many of the micro-scenes he covers (in impressive and useful detail, it should be acknowledged) appear to have had a strong ‘mob-mentality’. It would be unfair to presume the machismo of the period of hardcore punk’s predominance –1980 to ‘86, according to Blush – to be something of which the author necessarily approves or considers beneficial, that said. Early 1980s US hardcore certainly was violent, and the random beatings, pointless gang fights and needless brutality described do not necessarily indicate any approval from the author. The kind of aggressiveness admitted by his informants such as Al Barile of SS Decontrol – ‘we used to kick their ass... we weren’t trying to hurt anybody, we were just bringing that youthful enthusiasm... all those old people were totally petrified’²⁰ – might not be something Blush is necessarily attempting to glorify, then; rather, perhaps, the writer simply wishes to acknowledge the frequent brutality of the early US hardcore scene.

Having said that, *American Hardcore* focuses heavily upon violence throughout, from the blood-covered face on the book’s jacket to the routine accounts of unprovoked attacks inside. The text has numerous accompanying images of aggression. To give just one example, Jimmy Gestapo of NYC hardcore group Murphy’s Law is pictured with his fist drawn back alongside the caption ‘ready to kick ass’.²¹ Across the page from this, again to give just one example from many, the author informs us of the strategic advantage for Agnostic Front of the fact that one band member was ‘fucking Crazy Emily’.²² It displays a certain degree of homophobic hypocrisy in Blush that he

accurate accounts of the 1991-4 riot grrrl scene I have come across (*Riot*, pp.12-51 and pp.52-99 respectively).

²⁰ Blush, *American*, p.162.

²¹ *Ibid*: p.190.

²² *Ibid*: p.191.

can refer so casually to opportunistic *heterosexual* activity with someone who has been implied as being mentally ill on some level ('crazy'), yet feel the need to talk disapprovingly of a 'creepy' sexuality of the notoriously all-*homosexual* punk band Husker Dü's drummer: Blush writes of 'an overweight, barefoot and drugged-out Grant Hart, on the prowl for young [male] meat after a show'.²³ To be fair, Blush is more accepting of the band's sexuality when 'their predations were discreet'; the fact that he thinks it quite acceptable to recount his own predations in print ('I got a really lousy blowjob from a really pretty blonde chick in the bathroom'), however, seems to indicate something of a hetero-supremacist double-standard.²⁴

Based upon Blush's insider account, then, it would seem fair to say that the American punk-underground was rife with violence and sexism in the large part of the 1980s. His not-entirely-subtle put down of the 'so-called Riot Grrl [sic] movement' may reflect a general response of the older generation of punks to the riot grrrl generation.²⁵ In any case, it is not difficult, having examined Blush's account, to see why many women and men within punk would want to redress the scene's tendency

²³ Ibid: p.225.

²⁴ Ibid: p.225 for the first quote, p.272 for the parenthetical quotation. If the 'pretty blonde chick' performed the act so poorly because she lacked enthusiasm, it is reasonable to wonder whether Blush had in fact been 'on the prowl' himself. Whether or not such was the case, it is undeniably hypocritical of him to flaunt this information after the quoted disapproval with regard to Hart's reported search for sex.

²⁵ Ibid: p.115. Since it certainly was known as riot grrrl – with three r's, incidentally – the information that a 'movement' which he cannot even bother to spell correctly is 'so-called' would seem indubitably pejorative in intent.

towards sexism and violence. Such was the intention of the riot grrrls in the early 1990s.

In brief, the riot grrrl scene developed through a handful of young women, primarily based around DC and Olympia as has been widely reported elsewhere, who began talking, meeting and planning for a new network within the punk underground ‘so that we could have a chance to hang out with other girls who weren’t necessarily scenesters but who were cool nonetheless’, in the words of key player Molly Neuman.²⁶ Neuman, a native of DC, had re-located to Eugene, Oregon around 1991. In collaboration with Alison Wolfe, a native of nearby Olympia, she published a fanzine entitled *Girl Germs* with the stated intention of being ‘pro-girl, pro-punk rock, pro-underground. We are pro-people without voices, who have constantly been denied their voice, and we are pro-people.’²⁷ The last point is interesting, for it is precisely the alleged lack of such a value which (predictably enough) would bring many commentators within and outside the punk underground to conclude, erroneously it seems, that the riot grrrls were anti-men. In fact, the scene was ‘pro-people’, in large part, from the outset – but the priority was to be ‘pro-girl’, evidently.

In Spring ’91, Wolfe and Neuman visited DC for the college break and formed Bratmobile with Erin Smith on guitar. Though other members were involved initially, the band soon boiled down to this core line-up. Around the same period, Olympia’s Bikini Kill happened to be concluding their first US tour in DC. The latter band’s

²⁶ Quoted in Anderson, Mark, Jenkins, Mark, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation’s Capital* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001), p.315.

²⁷ *Girl Germs* fanzine, 1991, quoted in *ibid*: p.311.

vocalist Kathleen Hanna and drummer Tobi Vail connected naturally with the members of Bratmobile, particularly since Vail was also publishing the zine *Jigsaw* with a distinctly feminist analysis of ‘male-dominated punk rock scenes’.²⁸ The parallels between *Jigsaw* and *Girl Germs* were strong; the emphasis upon female empowerment was significant in both, but far from absolute. Vail, for example, declared herself to be searching for

real alternative communities that are based on something other than consumption. I feel completely left out of the realm of everything that is so important to me. And I know that this is partly because punk rock is for and by boys mostly [but also] partly because punk rock of this generation is coming of age in a time of mindless career-goal bands.²⁹

The emergent movement which would become known as riot grrrl, here at least, claimed itself to be not *only* about feminism, then. To emphasise this point is to risk accusations of patriarchal re-appropriation, perhaps, and certainly it would be foolish to deny that feminism was at the heart of riot grrrl. Referring the reader back to the connection between riot grrrl and Nirvana mentioned above, however, it is notable that Vail would appear to have been in a relationship with the soon-to-be rock star Kurt Cobain at the very time she wrote this. Accounts of Nirvana’s developing business relationship with the Gold Mountain management company, and their related negotiations with a range of major labels, suggests that Vail may well have had Cobain in mind, indeed. In any case, the anti-careerist tendency of riot grrrl is

²⁸ Ibid: p.308.

²⁹ Ibid: p.308.

undeniable in this comment from *Jigsaw*, and was undoubtedly a significant part of the agenda of the associated bands, zines and fans. This tendency, it is worth stressing, was in addition to the more ostensible intention to challenge sexism in punk; as well as that ambition, the riot grrrl-orientated groups wished to up-hold the more long-held tendency of the punk underground overall: to keep punk's operational tendency 'independent' and underground, and to ensure that anyone can do it.

Neumann, Hanna, Wolfe, Vail and Erin Smith, finding themselves in DC all at the same time with significant shared interests, made a decision to create a zine together. The group of young women seems to have been inspired by Jen Smith, who is known in the underground as a remarkable writer of letters.³⁰ In one letter to Molly Neumann, Smith proposed that 'this summer's going to be a girl riot'. As legend would have it, Neumann and friends then decided to reverse the last two words, adding the growl-implying triple 'r' and thus not only naming their fanzine but also providing the name for what is now perceived as a movement, *Riot Grrrl*. In *Riot Grrrl*'s third issue, the writers called for 'an all girl meeting to discuss the status of punk rock and revolution [and] ways to encourage higher female scene input and ways to help each other play instruments and get stuff done'.³¹

³⁰ I can say this from experience: Jen Smith sent some extraordinary letters to *Slampt* in the early 1990s, each written with passion and exuberance. In some ways, the development of e-mail has been to the detriment of the punk underground, because its easiness reduces the micromatic reciprocity of *effort* involved in writing, addressing and posting a letter. It is notable that Penny Rimbaud, for example, told me that I would have to arrange my fieldwork interview with him through either the postal service or by phoning him as he doesn't use e-mail. Such apparent 'Luddite' tendencies are common within the punk underground, though e-mail is overwhelmingly dominant in the 21st century.

³¹ Quoted in Anderson and Jenkins, *Dance*, pp.316-7.

Though the meeting was a success, with a reported nearly two dozen attendees, the instigators named at the top of the last paragraph had little further to do with what now became known as the riot grrrl movement. Nevertheless, the combination of all-female meetings/bands/zines proved a popular one, and riot grrrl seems to have soon snow-balled into a nationwide movement, with ‘chapters’ in many different US towns and cities. This spread occurred within a strikingly short period of time, mostly late 1991 and then more rapidly during early 1992. As is often the consequence of cultural work with a radical tinge, the scene also garnered a substantial quantity of mainstream coverage, only egged on by the rise of Nirvana/punk, ‘the new music’. Though the riot grrrl scene was certainly somewhat ‘hyped’ in the US, however, this was nothing compared with the media frenzy which accompanied the development of a UK correlate from 1992 onwards. I turn now to the other side of Atlantic, therefore, where riot grrrl was hyped up and then dressed down with astonishing speed by a weekly music press ravenous for sales-boosting novelty.

*What They Taught Me, That He’s Right; What I Find Myself, He’s Wrong.*³²

In early 1992, I was tipped off by several friends living in London that something had happened to ‘that band Huggy Bear’. They had supported cutie group Heavenly at the latter’s Christmas party the previous year, but made little impression on the crowd as I recall. By all accounts, they had been transformed a few months later, however.

Where the early gig had involved three effete boys and two sweet-looking girls in, if memory serves correctly, some form of homemade-looking matching garb, the new-

³² Mambo Taxi, ‘Insecure’, b-side of ‘Prom Queen’ 7", Clawfist, HUNKA 13, 1993.

look Huggy Bear was said to be totally wild and aggressive. They now sound like (legendary New York garage-noise outfit) Pussy Galore, confided one friend. They just seem to roam around the stage randomly hitting their instruments and screaming into microphones, alleged another. Subsequently, a close friend with whom I had shared a passion for fanzines, records and comics for several years provided me with the third issue of the *Huggy Nation* zine. The band had been handing out the fanzine at its shows, but it was unlike any other I had seen in many years of collecting such literature: pictures which looked like they might well be from pornographic magazines were placed alongside invective prose about sexism and the music industry. Elsewhere in the zine, bizarre poetic text which seemed to be based on phonetics as much as semantics gave it a surreal quality, though overall it was clearly the product of angry minds.

That summer, my friend Rachel Holborow received a package from Calvin Johnson of K records. She had sent him a copy of her zine, and in response he sent a pile of records for her to review, including a split 7" with Bratmobile on one side and Heavens to Betsy on the other. The band names were written on girls' bellies on the sleeve. The music was captivating: stripped down punk with one-stringed guitar parts, strongly recalling Johnson's own band Beat Happening. The K records catalogue, which Calvin had also included in the package, featured the words 'riot grrrl' in large, capital letters on its front cover.³³ We were intrigued, to say the least.

³³ The K catalogue in question is reproduced in Monem, *Riot*, p.15 (though incorrectly labelled as the 'Front cover of *Riot Grrrl*, no.15, featuring the K Records logo', it should be noted).

I include these personal recollections for more than anecdotal reasons: they illustrate, I believe, that the international punk underground was spreading the word of riot grrrl in its long-established, shall we say, *organic* fashion.³⁴ The records were circulating, and if the mainstream press had never written a word about riot grrrl, it seems evident that there still would have been a significant riot grrrl scene in the UK – a more significant one, perhaps, since the media coverage of the scene is widely believed to have turned UK riot grrrl into something of a still-born child, as it were.³⁵ Later that summer, Rachel and I decided to attempt to stimulate a scene in Newcastle upon Tyne (where we had been living for a couple of years), promoting local music with fanzines and cassettes. We decided to call it the Slampt Underground Organisation, with the neologism ‘Slampt’ reflecting our desire for maximal disconnection from pre-conceived values. Encouraging girls and musical beginners was a specific intention. Avoiding music industry conventions was another. Above all, we wanted to stimulate a local scene and show that anyone could do this.

After sending our first Slampt release – a double fanzine – to Amelia Fletcher of Heavenly in autumn 1992, we were delighted to get a letter back describing her experience of the burgeoning riot grrrl scene in the US. Heavenly, bastions of the cutie scene, had toured there that summer, spending time with Alison Wolfe and Erin Smith from Bratmobile. Amelia has since downplayed the importance of her role as

³⁴ By the word ‘organic’, I simply mean that information was being spread by word of mouth, by post and through small runs of cassettes, fanzines and 7" singles: the spread, in other words, involved no media-based growth-enhancement at this stage, none of the cultural pesticide of ‘hype’.

³⁵ As noted by Downes in Monem, *Riot Grrrl*, p.41: ‘Riot Grrrl experienced its own “false feminist death syndrome” as the media declared riot grrrl a political failure, a genre of bad music and a simplistic reinvention of (male) punk’.

connector between disparate underground scenes, stating that ‘I wrote to Rachel from Slampt about it [and] talked to Huggy Bear about it, but after that it really had nothing to do with me’.³⁶ Yet though she is probably right that ‘it would have got here [the UK] anyway’, the micromatic function of a single interlocutor bringing the news from one underground scene to another one is typical of the way punk has worked over the last few decades.³⁷ If Amelia had not written to Rachel, it is certain that we would have ‘found’ Huggy Bear in any case, because other friends were already alerting us as to their existence; yet without any such agency from any such individuals, the discourses which produce the possibility for an underground punk scene would obviously disappear. Multiple micromatic interactions structure the punk underground, in other words, and the kind of function provided by Amelia here was critical, though she seems to be too modest to admit her own importance to others.

As it happened, we can only speculate as to whether Amelia is correct that riot grrrl would have ‘got here anyway’, however. From mid 1992, the UK rock weeklies – firstly *Melody Maker*, then later *NME* also – began to give Huggy Bear and associated bands (Mambo Taxi, Blood Sausage, Cornershop, Linus, Skinned Teen and others) an astonishing amount of coverage. This began with a half-page feature on Huggy Bear, with an accompanying photograph in which the two male members of the band appeared to be French kissing (as were two of the girls), and culminated with two ‘cover-shot’ lead features. The first of these, in late ’92, was about riot grrrl generally, with much coverage of the US groups as well as a few UK bands. The second was focussed more specifically upon Huggy Bear and their appearance on (and swift

³⁶ Quoted in Monem, *Riot Grrrl*, p.64.

³⁷ Ibid: p.64.

ejection from) crass TV show *The Word* in February 1993. The latter incident was rather entertaining viewing, with a decidedly chaotic musical performance (featuring Amelia Fletcher on extra vocals, it is worth noting here). When the performance was followed by a feature on a pair of glamour model identical twins, the disapproval of the band and their friends/followers was audible. Their ejection from the studio followed swiftly. The incident was entertaining enough, but many commentators, both within and outside of the underground, questioned what Huggy Bear had expected when they agreed to participate in a mass media television event.

Without wanting to give too much detail of a story about which the interested reader can get more information elsewhere, there is an important question to be asked here: did Huggy Bear 'make their own bed' by colluding with the media and then, as they realised what problems this would bring, refusing to co-operate any further? Cazz Blaze has argued that, as compared with Bikini Kill (who continued until 1996), Huggy Bear were 'less able to cope with' the media backlash against them. This backlash was often highly personal, probably hastening the band's break up. At their last gig, upstairs at the Laurel Tree pub in Camden late 1994, I talked at some length with Niki (the band's vocalist/bassist) directly after their performance. I recall that she seemed weary with the scene, stating that the previous two or three years had been very hard to cope with in many ways. Sitting in an otherwise empty pub room (bouncers had cleared the hundred plus audience, but allowed myself and Rachel of Slampt to stay as we were talking with a band member), it would have been easy to see the performance as something of a defeat, given the much larger crowds the band had been drawing a year or so earlier and the amount of media coverage they had received.

I did not perceive it as such myself, and whilst undertaking this research I have spoken with many fans who have indicated that they believe Huggy Bear's 1994 album *Weaponry Listens to Love* to have been their best work.³⁸ A full-length album, *Weaponry* contains a level of musical complexity of which few would have thought Huggy Bear to be capable. The band's performance that night was as passionate and intense as any I had seen them give, it is worth adding. Though the band members had grown out of their earlier tendency to bang guitars off the floor for sound-effects and such like, they had become genuinely 'tight', stretching themselves to play in complex time signatures akin to the US hardcore bands they now admired, such as Universal Order of Armageddon (about whom Chris was particularly enthusiastic). As a 'fan', I felt it made no difference that the band was playing in a pub to a less-than-gigantic audience: the music was good, it seemed to me, and the atmosphere electric. Indeed, what was peculiar, one could argue, was not the stage they were on by that point but, rather, the one they had been upon in the 1992-3 period. In this period, Huggy Bear would perform for, for example, 1500 bored-looking students in the Camden Palace, with a high degree of cynicism in the dressing room before their performance as far as I recall. Liz Naylor, whose Catcall label issued the Huggy

³⁸ Amongst those Huggy Bear enthusiasts who state such an opinion were record-label owners Rachel Holborow (Slampt), Chris Phillips (Piao!) and John Jervis (WIAIWYA), musicians Marc Walker (Red Monkey), Jason Etherington (the Money Shot) and Steve Robson (Spraydog), fanzine writers James Atkinson (*Oscar Smokes the Leftovers*), Jeff Bateman (*Fast Connection*) and Joseph O'Sullivan (*Bilge Chronicles*) and others. Presumably there are other enthusiasts for whom Huggy Bear's earlier recordings are superior, though I have not heard any firm opinions to that effect and certainly none with the conviction of the above-named persons that *Weaponry Listens to Love* constitutes Huggy Bear's best work.

Bear/Bikini Kill split album in 1993, has stated that the promotional tour she organised for the band ‘was like playing to an audience of London cabbies’.³⁹ As an attendee of much of that tour, I see her point, though I’m not sure I can agree with her that ‘it was a great moment’ therefore; as I recall, the 1994 Huggy Bear gigs, where the band was performing to its core, *underground* audience, had a far better atmosphere, as did Bikini Kill’s relatively low-key 1996 UK tour.⁴⁰

³⁹ Quoted in O’Brien, Lucy, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Penguin, 1995), p.163. Naylor did not actively book the tour herself, instead using a booking agent, and it should be noted that Gary Walker of Wija records played a significant role in Huggy Bear’s affairs at this time. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that Liz Naylor played a crucial role in pushing Huggy Bear towards the mainstream in the UK, a push which I would say was regretted by the band in the long run.

⁴⁰ Ibid: p.163. To be fair, Naylor’s comment in O’Brien is that Huggy Bear’s performance on *The Word* was ‘a great moment’, not necessarily referring specifically to the tour’s frequent confrontations between band and audience, therefore. Her general tone in the *She Bop* quotes, however, is clearly one of enthusiasm for the confrontational atmosphere she had played a significant role in creating. In this respect, her attitude recalls that of Malcolm McClaren, who stirred up a significant amount of trouble for the Sex Pistols in 1976-8. In both instances, it was of course the band who had to deal with the actual audience aggression, the virulence of which I know Huggy Bear to have found very difficult to cope with. Naylor’s emphasis upon ‘guys [who] had paid £4 to come in and look at the enemy’ overlooks the fact that at least some male attendees were in fact sympathetic to the riot grrrl cause/message. For example, Laurence Worthington (then an anonymous audience member, though he would go on to play with legendary 1990s punk-funkers the Yummy Fur) told me that he was thrown out of the Glasgow venue Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear were playing (and beaten up by bouncers outside) after Kathleen Hanna accidentally mistook him for the perpetrator of some form of groping incident. Laurence also told me, in 1995, that he couldn’t believe these bands were playing such an inappropriately mainstream-orientated venue.

My impression, shared by others I have talked with since, was that Huggy Bear regretted their appearance on *The Word* and regarded their appearances in the UK music papers as an error of judgement, but it is hard to say for sure – especially so since the band refused to give interviews from mid-1993 onwards, and entirely disappeared from the UK music scene after 1994.⁴¹ In any case, it is certain that the cartoon-like misrepresentation they received from the music press was not well-taken by the band, naturally enough. It was not unusual, around that time, for example, to see the band's sexual politics lampooned in a thoroughly unacceptable manner; *NME*, for example, made reference to Niki being 'a right little cracker', and I know that all the band members suffered confrontational aggression from strangers during their

⁴¹ Layla Gibbon, co-ordinator of 'the punk bible' *Maximum Rock'n'Roll* fanzine since 2008, was close to Huggy Bear's inner circle between 1992 and 1994. Performing at that time in riot grrrl group Skinned Teen, Layla has indicated to me in e-mail conversations undertaken during my research that she agrees strongly that Huggy Bear regretted their appearances on *The Word* and in *NME*. Neither she nor I could recall any specific comments to that effect, that said. As with all other key players in the 1992-4 riot grrrl movement I have spoken to during my research (such as Tobi Vail of Bikini Kill and Alison Wolfe of Bratmobile), Layla found herself 'stone-walled' by the ex-members of Huggy Bear after the group's demise in 1994, and thus unable to ascertain a longer view of the band's retrospective attitude. Huggy Bear's guitarist Jon Slade is the only ex-member who remains available for conversation with ex-associates. He indicated to me in a recent informal conversation that he had felt somewhat abandoned by what he had previously thought of as his best friends when Huggy Bear split up, it is worth adding. Only willing and able to speak on his own behalf, Jon indicated that he felt some ambivalence in retrospect with regard to Huggy Bear's television appearance and that it had been 'a crazy time'. It seems likely, all this taken into account, that the extreme dissociation of the core ex-members of Huggy Bear regarding their 1992-4 identity was a product of some significant regret with regard to their time as a band overall and, therefore, with regard to their crucial appearances upon *The Word* and in *NME* in 1992-3.

years as a band.⁴² Lucy O'Brien has even reported that some journalists would refer to Huggy Bear as a 'feminazi' group.⁴³

Another criticism of the riot grrrl scene, more worthy of consideration, was with regard to its alleged elitism. 'I smell a secret fear of actually connecting with anyone outside their elitist fanzine culture', complained a journalist for the *Melody Maker* in 1994; 'most of you don't... get invited to the riot grrrl "cabinet meetings"'.⁴⁴ The last jibe is quite ludicrous, given that the riot grrrl movement carried forward certain operational principles from anarcho-punk and, therefore, the idea of bands like Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear having cabinet meetings is laughable (clearly, indeed, the journalist's suggestion was a joke, but one with an obvious political motivation, and an ill-conceived implication).⁴⁵ The accusation of elitism must hold at least some

⁴² For example, *NME* reported in 1993 that Jo from Huggy Bear was punched in the face by a female assailant at their Derby Warehouse show. This was confirmed for me by attendee Chris Lanigan who stated, in a semi-formal interview, that the assault was unprovoked and appeared to be the consequence of strong encouragement from the assailant's belligerent boyfriend. Hostility from the audience, though normally only verbal, was observable at many Huggy Bear shows, indeed.

⁴³ O'Brien, *She Bop*, p.164.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Monem, *Riot Grrrl*, p.41.

⁴⁵ Though the connection between riot grrrl and the cutie scene is demonstrable, the connection between the grrrl-scene and anarcho-punk might seem less obvious. It is worth noting, therefore, that I stayed with Chris from Huggy Bear at his mother's house in Epping in 1994, at which time he made a point of taking Rachel and myself to a field nearby and pointing out the location of the Crass commune Dial House beyond some trees on the other side of the clearing. In the US, Crass and anarcho-punk have been a consistent and significant influence upon the overall punk scene, including riot grrrl, it is worth adding. In terms of 'cabinet meetings', I did once sit at a table with members of Huggy Bear whilst they discussed whether or not to accept the offer of a support slot with Nirvana (they agreed that

water, nevertheless, for even a sympathetic theorist such as Stephen Duncombe has expressed comparable concerns:

By producing zines and networking with each other, Riot Grrrls become producers instead of consumers, creating their own spaces rather than living within the confines of those made for them. But some crucial political questions still remain. How does cultural action translate into political change? And how do you build a movement when you are afraid to coalesce as a community? Because these problems are routinely neglected by Riot Grrrls (and other zinesters), a more appropriate question might be, Do they really want to change the greater society at all?⁴⁶

Duncombe's line of interrogation is good, reiterating his complaint that the punk underground 'abandons the only large-scale, coherent "common culture" today to consumer capitalism' (see chapter two) and I shall consider it in more detail in the conclusion of this study. For the time being, I shall offer only a counter-view from Kathleen Hanna:

What other [female] bands do is go, 'It's not important that I'm a girl, it's just important that I want to rock'. And that's cool. But that's more of an assimilationist thing. It's like they want to be allowed to join the world as it is;

they should decline) but found no significant difference between their inter-personal negotiations and those of other punk bands I have known.

⁴⁶ Duncombe, *Notes*, p.70.

whereas I'm into revolution and radicalism and changing the whole structure.

What I'm into is making the world different for me to live in.⁴⁷

This somewhat refutes Duncombe, in fact: Hanna – the prime theorist of riot grrrl, arguably – seems to be stating that indeed she *does* want to change the ‘greater society’ (‘the whole structure’). The nuance of punk’s predisposition towards an anarchistic sense of individuality (‘...for *me*’, Hanna requires a revolution), and its relation to the need to ‘coalesce as a community’ (as insisted upon by Duncombe), will require careful examination, given the apparent incompatibility of the two positions. At present, let us examine more closely the content of two specific pieces of music which are central to the riot grrrl scene, in order to ascertain their relationship to the wider punk tradition and, yet more widely, the rock tradition overall. Is this music elitist, in the sense that it interests itself only with a micro-social grouping? If so, can it still contribute seriously to ‘revolution and radicalism and changing the whole structure’? Where in the music does this radicalism take root? What is it, in the music, which – perhaps – engendered a new-sense that may have allowed a micromatic recoil in which (all the) others ‘present’ in this ‘moment’ may have felt a certain empowerment therein?

It is natural, for the purpose of addressing these questions, to select pieces from the prime movers of the US and UK riot grrrl scenes, Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear respectively. I begin with the latter; the reader is encouraged to listen to track five on the accompanying CD before proceeding.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Reynolds and Press, *Sex*, pp.326-7.

*Her Jazz.*⁴⁸

The band starts together, on a garage-rock three-note riff using only the tonic, flat-seventh and minor third of the key of A, pure ‘All Day and All of the Night’ territory (see example 3 for the opening riff from ‘Her Jazz’). The drums are swinging along with the snare adding a quaver up-beat on alternate back-beats, and some kind of extra percussion is clattering away audibly and rather erratically though not entirely un-musically. One guitar is adding harmonics, burrs and other peculiarities, presumably to vary the texture. This is classic, hallmark lo-fi punk and whilst it might not be to everyone’s taste, you could dance to it easily enough.



The female voice cuts in; ‘I watched us struck...’ She is the voyeur, but this isn’t a reversal of the ‘G.L.O.R.I.A.’ to ‘M.E.L.V.I.N.’ variety.⁴⁹ She doesn’t just want to look at the un-named ‘him’, she wants to look at them as a pair (‘us two too’). Yet it’s clear that she doesn’t like what she sees. He is using her sexually (‘driving me into your dick’), and he is insincere when he claims parity between them as revolutionaries

⁴⁸ Huggy Bear, ‘Her Jazz’, Wiiiija/Catcall, TROUBLE 001, 1993.

⁴⁹ ‘G.L.O.R.I.A.’, of course, is the focus of attention in Them’s garage-rock classic, covered by countless later garage bands such as the Shadows of Knight. Its gender reversal, in which the object of desire becomes ‘M.E.L.V.I.N.’, was first performed by garage girl-group the Belles in 1966, and later taken up by the Headcoatees in the 1990s. Huggy Bear would frequently attend the latter group’s gigs, it is worth noting; indeed, it would be fair to say that ‘Her Jazz’ betrays this influence in identifiable ways.

(‘you and me... that’s what you *told* me’). The vocalisation is well-suited to the lyrics, with her awakened sexuality (‘I’ll run you over’; by taking the driving seat, presumably) emphasised by a diva-like vocal glissando (‘watch meeeee...’; she is on her own, now).

Hitting the chorus, the band and vocalist go at it full tilt on a variation of the verse riff extended up to the sub-dominant note and then, not unusually for garage rock, a flattened fifth (turning the tonic chord into a diminished triad, and thus bringing an attendant harmonic ‘weirdness’ gratifyingly into the aural picture). The words could not make the fundamental point of the song more clearly evident: ‘boy/girl revolutionaries? YOU LIED TO ME!’, the vocalist rasps.

Structurally, it is interesting that the opening verse riff does not return throughout the remainder of the song. What feels like the second verse is actually based on a chromatic fluctuation back and forth between the major-seventh (G-sharp) and the flattened-second (B-flat) via the tonic (A). The effect recalls dissonant groups such as Sonic Youth, whom Huggy Bear had played with in late 1992, and given the accompanying lyrics (‘face it, you’re old and out of touch...’) may have been a sly dig at the senior band.⁵⁰ This leads back into the chorus, but further structural and

⁵⁰ Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth, both well in to their thirties by the early 1990s, were generous supporters of the younger generation of punk-underground bands such as Bikini Kill, Nirvana and Huggy Bear. Bikini Kill responded with a degree of sarcasm in their song ‘Thurston Hearts the Who’ (presumably a pun on ‘Horton Hears a Who’, the Dr. Seuss book) in which Tobi Vail sang ‘if Sonic Youth thinks you’re cool, does that mean everything to you?’. It is likely, however, that Vail’s then-boyfriend Kurt Cobain was as much the butt of the joke as Thurston Moore (it also could have been self-deprecating humour, feasibly). Overall, I believe Sonic Youth to have been as admired

developmental interest is maintained by the transposition of the chorus riff into the sub-dominant position. After returning to the tonic position, the band treads through the dominant and sub-dominant positions to imply a twelve-bar blues structure.⁵¹

Hinting at the song's opening riff, the song's miniature third verse is based only upon the tonic and flattened-seventh chords (more 'You Really Got Me' than 'All Day and All of the Night' now, then). The words in this third verse make the entire point of the song unmistakable, one would have thought: the emphasis has been reversed, and now it is 'the arrival of a new renegade *girl/boy* hyper-nation' which is being celebrated precisely because 'I like it that way' (with girl before boy, that is). This simple point seems to have been missed by most of the (mostly male, it is worth noting) journalists at *NME* and *Melody Maker* around this time, however, for they regularly lampooned Huggy Bear as the 'boy/girl revolutionaries'. Missing the point may, of course, have been a deliberate strategy, an intentional put-down – the UK rock weeklies were far from subtle in the hostility towards Huggy Bear and the other riot grrrl-orientated bands. Rather than focus upon blatant chauvinism and sexism, however, I would like to cross-check my analysis of 'Her Jazz' against some comments on Huggy Bear from Simon Reynolds and Joy Press. Summarily, I find 'Her Jazz' to be a somewhat structurally-unusual piece with prominent use of dissonant tonality mixed with passages of fairly raw, garage-style (thus more consonant, though nevertheless with

by most of the riot grrrl-orientated groups as they were by the majority of the rest of the punk underground; certainly Huggy Bear were excited, at the time, to have been offered their 1992 support slot, according to Chris Phillips of the Piao! label, who was fairly close to the band at that time.

⁵¹ They would have needed to double the length of both dominant and sub-dominant positions in order to conform to a strict twelve-bar structure, but the harmonic development conforms unmistakably to the standard blues pattern.

some mixolydian-based interest) riffing. The pivotal line in the song mentions an ‘arrival’ of something ‘new’ which leads to the concluding line’s insistence upon an imminent ‘our time now’ signalled by ‘Her Jazz’. I find, then, the song to suggest something of a micromatic recoil in which distinct musical sounds demand an arrival of ‘our time’. Press and Reynolds, however, seem to hear something quite different.

In *The Sex Revolts*, their mid-1990s book on ‘gender, rebellion and rock’n’roll’, the writers acknowledge how much they love most of the thoroughly-sexist rock groups about which they write: ‘some of the “worst offenders”... are among our all-time favourites’ and ‘nearly all of the artists covered in this book are ones we like’.⁵²

Huggy Bear, it’s fair to presume, must be the exception to whom their caveat (‘nearly...’) refers, since Press and Reynolds argue that there are ‘myriad limits to this mixed-gender band’s ability [whose] would-be experimentalism is crippled by a fanatical, almost doctrinaire rejection of the notion of “virtuosity”’.⁵³

To be fair, Press and Reynolds are not musicologists, and it would perhaps be cruel therefore to say that their ability to justify this claim is ‘crippled’ by a rejection of rudimentary musical analysis.⁵⁴ It is difficult to ascertain, that said, what they find to be ‘fanatical’ in the musical performance described above. In conventional musico-analytic terms, it would seem most comparable to the male-only bands whose music

⁵² Reynolds and Press, *Sex*, p.xiii.

⁵³ Ibid: p.330.

⁵⁴ When they do attempt to employ musical terminology, they make some embarrassing errors, such as the incorrect claim that ‘chromaticism... cannot be notated’ (ibid: p.201), or that a piece features ‘Indian Raga chords’ (p.165), and suchlike. (The raga, which is of course a scale for use in improvisation, is not used for chords.)

the authors praise as a ‘rock’n’roll *in excelsis* [of] male ferocity, resentment, virulence’.⁵⁵ For example, the opening verse riff in ‘Her Jazz’ is hardly a million miles from Led Zeppelin’s ‘Whole Lotta Love’, both being based on a three-note modal pattern with some straightforward syncopation over a simple drum rhythm (see example 4, then cf. ex.3⁵⁶). Led Zeppelin’s heavy riffing appears to Press and Reynolds as being ‘phallic... wargasmic... brutally simplistic and ballistic, coitus as combat...’; later in the song, the riff ‘magically re-erects, and rampages on unabated’. Huggy Bear’s ‘Her Jazz’, by contrast, is described in very different terms: ‘the low-level, rabbleroising rumpus of the music, with its call-to-arms slogans... remains surprisingly modest and retro-fixated’.⁵⁷

For a book on gender by what might have appeared to be intellectually well-grounded authors, the phraseology with which they choose to denigrate Huggy Bear is quite remarkable: ‘Huggy Bear became mediatised very rapidly. And you have to wonder – using the expression in full awareness of its connotations – if they weren’t ‘asking for it’... history’s verdict will be, quite fairly: “all mouth and no trousers”’.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Ibid: p.xiii.

⁵⁶ Example 4 has been transposed in order to highlight the riff’s comparability with that shown in ex. 3.

⁵⁷ Ibid: p.115 for the description of Led Zeppelin, pp.330-1 for the comments on Huggy Bear.

⁵⁸ Ibid: p.331. To put the author’s accusation in context, I attended a meeting in Seattle, early Summer 1998, with a large group of very politically-active agitators preparing for the ‘anti-globalisation’ demonstration which would make headlines all over the world that November. Discovering the bassist from my band (Red Monkey) had appeared on stage with Huggy Bear several times, one of the attendees told me at length how significant Huggy Bear *specifically* had been in the process of his ‘politicisation’ earlier in the decade. Perhaps Seattle ’98 too was ‘all mouth and no trousers’, by implication, then.



It is not only the lack of trousers of which Reynolds and Press disapprove, however: they voice great concern over the band's use of 'revolutionary rhetoric and manifesto mongering' since it 'always draws a crowd' and, in their opinion, amounts to no more than 'sales patter' here, therefore. Again, their deliberate invocation of the phallus is remarkable: 'it [the alleged revolutionary rhetoric] imparts a sort of erection of the soul'.⁵⁹ But where Tori Amos's cover of 'Whole Lotta Love' is 'hilarious, half mocking the song's penile dementia, half still a little in awe and in lust', it is clear that Huggy Bear's 'erection of the soul' just isn't big and hard enough to inspire any such emotions in Reynolds and Press. It's not that they don't like women as such, then; it's just that they prefer the version of 'femininity' presented by Tori Amos to that of Huggy Bear.

A crucial element in *The Sex Revolts*' critique of a perceived 'riot grrrl' sound is with regard to 'musical technique... which can only help when it comes to inscribing gender difference in to sound'.⁶⁰ Huggy Bear's pre-cognised response is written on the back of the 'Her Jazz' 7", stating their desire to be 'challenging dull, restrictive conceptions of difference'. Whether or not this caveat is found to be persuasive or not, it is certainly a bit rich for Press and Reynolds to request an 'attempt to interrogate the

⁵⁹ Ibid: p.327.

⁶⁰ Ibid: p.327.

phallogocentric forms of rock itself', on the one hand, and then to complain so bitterly about the 'musical technique' (or alleged lack thereof) used by a band which clearly was attempting just such a thing, on the other hand.

'Consciously inscribing gender difference into sound could be one way of opening up a whole new frontier for rock'; surely this is just what Huggy Bear were attempting?⁶¹ It is necessary for a musicologist, however, to wonder what Reynolds and Press think could constitute such inscription. If the authors are thinking, for example, of polyrhythm and/or dissonant tonality (which seems likely, since they compare riot grrrl-associated music unfavourably to the Raincoats and Throwing Muses) then they could have found both in abundance on the Huggy Bear album *Weaponry Listens to Love*, the band's only full-length album which was released the year before *The Sex Revolts* was published.⁶² The suspicion must linger, therefore, that the authors came to bury Huggy Bear and the Riot Grrrls, and that they lacked the slightest willingness to praise them. This suspicion would seem to be confirmed by their allegation that 'the musical flesh is puny' in the case of my next study piece, a song by US riot grrrl pioneers Bikini Kill. In order to begin to consider this allegation, the reader is encouraged to listen to track six on the CD of examples.

⁶¹ Ibid: p.327.

⁶² Huggy Bear, *Weaponry Listens to Love*, LP, Wiiiija, WIJ 37V, 1994.

Feels Blind.⁶³

A solitary bass, the lower-end sympathetic vibrations (undertones) of which have been very well captured by the recording engineer, drops in on the E an octave above the bass guitar's lowest pitch (in conventional tuning, that is).⁶⁴ The first note is actually shakily played, and was indeed performed by a beginner musician – as is typically the case in the punk-underground, excepting the *math rock* scene about which I shall be giving more information shortly. She soon picks up her swing, however, as the riff thuds in straight crotchets through D and then down to a four beat bar of A. At the second bar's cadence, a quick, syncopated flick back up to D keeps the phrase rolling. Repetitions of the riff provide consistent syncopation and variation, a relaxed performance with plenty of swing.

This bass riff actually recalls the song 'I Bleed', by one of 'alternative' music's most well-known bands of the preceding years, the Pixies.⁶⁵ Kim Deal, bassist of the Pixies, is often said to have had a particularly 'female' way of playing, presumably

⁶³ Bikini Kill, 'Feels Blind', *Bikini Kill*.

⁶⁴ It is worth noting that this recording was captured by Ian MacKaye of Fugazi (undoubtedly one of the most significant players in the punk underground) in conjunction with Don Zientara (the engineer who had by then been providing recording services for MacKaye's Dischord label for more than ten years). Anderson and Jenkins report that MacKaye volunteered to pay for and oversee the recording after seeing Bikini Kill play DC for the first time in June 1991, *Dance*, p.312.

⁶⁵ Pixies, 'I Bleed', *Doolittle*, 4AD, 60856-1, 1989. The descriptor 'alternative' was more popular in the US than the term 'indie' which, by contrast, was dominant in the UK. During the 1980s, the two terms had a similar denotation, nevertheless. In the decades since then, however, the two terms have gained distinct connotations based on musical sound, hence my choice to describe the Pixies as an alternative band here.

because her performances tended to be ‘earthy’ by being grounded in simple-but-powerful rhythms; though straightforward, her patterns are very musically appealing and are often deceptively inventive. ‘I Bleed’ is based on an E-B-E-A four-bar pattern (one bar per note), but transposed to start on A it would actually use the same three notes as ‘Feels Blind’, in a very similar harmonic relationship.⁶⁶ Furthermore, both songs have a very similar tempo and are essentially bass-led, with the guitar and vocals parts weaving around the repeating loop of the bass line. ‘I Bleed’ has a more clever, subtly chromatic vocal line, ‘Feels Blind’ has a more intriguing, ambiguously-modal harmonic structure, but in terms of the bass playing, there is a great deal of harmonic and performative similarity. If Kim Deal’s playing sounds ‘feminine’, as is very often claimed, it seems logical enough to insist that Kathi Wilcox of Bikini Kill’s does also, therefore.⁶⁷

At its point of entrance, the drum part on ‘Feels Blind’ sounds militaristic by dint of its insistent quaver flams on the snare with pick-up fills to lead back into each cycle of four bars. (A cross reference against Penny Rimbaud’s drumming in Crass would reveal great similarities, we can note.) The fill which leads into the vocal entrance is

⁶⁶ To be precise, ‘Feels Blind’ has modal tinges by dint of the blue thirds, prominent flat sevenths and implication of a I-VII-IV harmonic scheme whereas the guitar decoration and vocal line in ‘I Bleed’ render it unambiguously in the major key with a I-V-I-V structure.

⁶⁷ Kim Deal, it has been argued, has little truck with the frequently-voiced opinion that she has a ‘womanly’ way of playing, however: Lucy O’Brien has stated that Deal ‘didn’t believe in a magical emotional gender difference’, *She Bop*, p.173. Having said that, the actual quote O’Brien offers suggests that the Pixies bass player in fact *did* see some gender difference in musical performance – ‘Why do we even need to take away [the male musician’s] thing? Why don’t we ignore it and just create this much cooler thing?’, *ibid*: p.173.

tastefully and confidently played; at which point the drummer introduces the ride and ‘kick’ (bass drum), naturally enough for rock music. The percussionist’s performance remains tasteful and confident throughout. Her fills are not ostentatious, nor are they complex, but they are varied from phrase to phrase and are clearly the work of a performer with belief in her own abilities and sensitivity with regard to general musicality. Her kick-work is quite accomplished, particularly in a punk context where many drummers – male or not – are decidedly challenged when required to play at such slow tempi.

The voice enters on a fairly sweet timbre: ‘all the doves that fly past my eyes, have a stickiness to their wings...’. The melody enters on the note E, and pedals there until the word ‘eyes’, at which point it drops down, via D, to C-sharp (see example 5). This last note is important because, being accompanied by an A on the bass guitar, the feeling that we are in the key of A major is encouraged. As with ‘Increase the Pressure’ by Conflict (which has a strikingly similar is-it-V-IV-I-or-is-it-I- ♭ VII-IV harmonically ambiguous introduction; see chapter three above), there is a degree of uncertainty as to which note might be the tonic. Unlike that anarcho-punk piece, however, the ambiguity is not resolved one way or another in the present case. Instead of any such blatant search for power (increased pressure) through harmonic certainty, ‘Feels Blind’ even intensifies its harmonic ambivalence by adding a bluesy almost-C-natural pedal in its chorus (‘how does it feel? *It feels blind*’, the italicised words’ descent to A clearly implying A *minor* now).

Example 5

All the doves that fly past my eye - yi - yies

The sweetness with which the singer introduced the song is all gone by the end of the first verse (‘encased in the whisper you taught me’); it will make a slight return at the outset of the second (‘if you were blind and there was no Braille...’), but can barely be mustered at all by the third. Instead, sweetness is replaced with intensely-performed righteous anger – punk’s stock-in-trade – for the repeated line ‘I eat your hate like love...’. By the song’s close, the melody from this Buddhist claim for turning negativity into positivity (hate like love) is performed as a wordlessly-sung return to the sweet-girl voice, with a restatement of the A-major harmony provided by a closing C-sharp from the vocalist.

‘Feels Blind’ is not a ‘puny’ piece of music, despite the accusation from Press and Reynolds (see above). Each instrumentalist performs with a fairly typical level of dexterity by punk standards, excepting perhaps the slightly uninspiring guitar part (performed, it is worth noting, by the only male member of the band). The rhythm section is about as able as, for example, that of the Clash or the Manic Street Preachers.⁶⁸ Yet these two male bands receive none of the invective reserved in *The*

⁶⁸ There are grounds for arguing that Bikini Kill’s guitarist is a superior player to those in the Clash and the Manics, that said: the latter two’s guitar players restrict themselves to a very tiresome formula of basic licks and riffs, all of which have been accomplished by the average guitar-playing GCSE music student, whilst Billy from Bikini Kill at least proves himself to be imaginative with his chord voicings and reasonably tasteful moments of single-string minimalism.

Sex Revolts for the music associated with riot grrrl. Why is this? The degree of amateurism locatable in the music of Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill is generally in keeping with that of the punk movement overall, certainly including the cutie groups for whom Simon Reynolds had been a sometime advocate. We might guess, then, that the contempt for Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill demonstrated by Reynolds and Press (see above) is simply a product of either a change in taste for Reynolds or a vehement dislike of ‘amateur’ music-making from Joy Press. With the latter possibility in mind, we might note Press and Reynolds’ quotation of Hole singer (and wife of Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain, it is worth noting here) Courtney Love:

I worked from the moment you met me to be competitive with the *boys*... if [girls] are going to pick up a wooden spoon and a saucepan and put out a bunch of crap [then nevertheless] I don’t have to go down there with you and beat on that pot...⁶⁹

Love has claimed herself to be a punk rocker many times, yet her comments here are quite contrary to the idea that anyone can do it: music as competition, rather, would seem to be her preference (although for many punks, the fact that the music is a bunch of crap is precisely what’s great about it, of course). Musicianship in the punk underground in general and the riot grrrl-associated groups in particular, by contrast, can be seen to propose the music can be other than competition. Rather, it might be considered as a tool of expression: possibly complex, possibly aggressive or demented or inventive, but done for expressive reasons rather than as some form of ‘one-upmanship’.

⁶⁹ Courtney Love of Hole, quoted in O’Brien, *She Bop*, p.168.

The many-sided relationship between gender and music is far too complex an issue to introduce here in any depth, yet it would seem irresponsible not to mention that much of the tension between the riot grrrls' ideal and the evaluations of Love, Reynolds and Press seem to hinge upon questions of solidarity in which mutual support between females, for one side, is paramount whilst, for the other side, it is effectively an irrelevance. For many participants, including a remarkable number of males, riot grrrl brought a new-sense in which a micromatic recoil allowed a moment where anyone could do it, perhaps. If this was felt to be the case by some, however, no such presence would appear to have been recognised by rock journalists such as Joy Press and Simon Reynolds, not to mention the innumerable less respect-worthy rock writers of the early 1990s.⁷⁰ We might conclude, then, that it was only a micro-social group which could recognise a feeling that, in riot grrrl, anyone can do it; from an outside point of view, the riot grrrls failed to show that anyone can do it and instead showed only that these females could fail to make valuable music.

It isn't, that said, the case that only females could do riot grrrl's 'it', as we have seen: the founding fanzines of the movement were 'pro-people' as well as being 'pro-girl' and males were involved in the scene in various ways. ('Movement' is a fair term here, I would argue: the evidence above indicates that riot grrrl motivated a significant number of people to move towards certain tendencies and ideals; punk underground

⁷⁰ Hopefully the sustained criticisms of Simon Reynolds in this and the previous chapter do not read as an *argumentum ad hominem* critique: it is precisely his pre-eminence as a rock journalist (and particularly amongst writers on post-punk musics) which makes his work such a useful 'yardstick' of rock criticism more generally against which to measure the argument I am making here.

ideals, essentially.) The significant thing about the music associated with riot grrrl, in terms of what seems to have been a felt-possibility of mutual solidarity, is that it appears to have drawn upon a certain support for the other which was explicitly associated with female-ness. (It is worth recalling here that, as noted in chapter two, Derrida implies a linkage between the recoil and the feminine, or at the very least he counterpoises the recoil interpretation of Aristotle's 'O my friends...' against the *androcentric* canonical interpretation.) If Courtney Love did not share such an impetus towards encouraging the female amateur, it certainly seems to be the case that riot grrrl successfully did.⁷¹ If Press and Reynolds recognised little or no musical quality in the music of Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill, furthermore, my analyses here suggest that there is enough to talk about in this music to support the idea that the new-sense which enthusiasts appear to have found in riot grrrl-associated music was the product of more than simply a 'doctrinaire rejection of the notion of "virtuosity"' (see above).

Rather than entirely rejecting the virtuoso, riot grrrl-associated performers made a classic punk move: promoting the simplicity which, allegedly, 'anyone can do', and therefore looking for expression amongst those subtler performative gestures which do not require a virtuoso to deliver them. Kim Deal of the Pixies recently demonstrated the method in episode 6 of the BBC's *Seven Ages of Rock*: the difference between her and most bass players (if she means *male* bass players, she

⁷¹ One need only glance through the literature available on riot grrrl to see that this is the case: it inspired many young women and a fair number of young men with little or no musical experience to start bands, and brought forth intense feelings of comradeship and firm encouragement for other amateurs.

does not say as much, although many would consider it very much a male tendency) is precisely that ‘they’ want to syncopate, fill in gaps or divert from a straightforwardness which she, by contrast, amply demonstrates on bass guitar for the camera. Deal, as we have seen, has been held up as a leading female-centric musician precisely on account of this approach to music-making.⁷²

It is just this leadership, however, which renders problematical the whole aspiration for a local environment in which anyone can do it; for if Kim Deal is a leading supporter of some immediate other, whose micromatic recoil encourages expression in this other, surely then her very leadership undermines the ‘weak messianic power’ which otherwise might have arrived? There is no solution to this problematic which is why Derrida insists that justice is always to come; yet we can nevertheless note that, if expression can arrive locally as a recognition – no matter how ‘interrupted’ in the Levinasian sense – of the absolute alterity of the other, then just a possibility of some locally-‘present’ element of mutuality might be glimpsed, impossible though we perhaps should say that such a thing is. Kim Deal is not the greatest advocate of the punk underground, with a track record of performing on recordings with some degree of association with major labels, as some voices within the punk underground have been keen to point out.⁷³ Her explanation of what she aspires to in her playing (as referenced in the previous paragraph), however, neatly encapsulates a tendency which I have attempted to highlight in my discussion above of the two pieces of more

⁷² *Seven Ages of Rock: 6. Left of the Dial (Alternative Rock 1980-1994)*, dir. Alastair Lawrence, BBC, 60 mins, 2007.

⁷³ Deal has mostly recorded for the 4AD label in the UK, whose parent group Beggars Banquet has had some degree of business involvement with WEA. This corporate association was complained of on numerous occasions by *Maximum Rock’n’Roll* fanzine during the 1990s.

definitely riot grrrl-orientated music: musical expression not as ostentation of technical ability but rather as a straightforward performance, yet one which retains a certain (necessary) character comparable to that which one might feel to be recognisable in certain ‘folk’ performances.⁷⁴ As noted in chapter one, the idea that punk is a form of folk music has been frequently voiced. In the case of riot grrrl, one can glimpse just such a similarity: tradition and variation interact, with identification of the subtler variations from tradition providing a felt-presence of *différance* or, in the terms I have offered in chapter two above, a new-sense.⁷⁵

The traditional element within the two songs I have examined here is readily identifiable: the reference to twelve-bar blues in ‘Her Jazz’, the occasional blue notes from both of the female vocalists, the minor pentatonic scales which structure the bulk of the music in both songs. There are other elements, by contrast, which are unusual in both rock generally and punk specifically: the almost-unchanging bass part in ‘Feels Blind’ and its unusually wide range of vocal stylings, the variable structure of the verse in ‘Her Jazz’ and its employment of somewhat extravagant language (‘post-

⁷⁴ This retention is necessary simply because the other cannot simply be dissolved in the same, as I have argued in ‘Punk as Folk: Tradition as Inevitability, the Appearance of Subjectivity and the Circuitry of Justice’, *Radical Musicology* 4/1 (2009), 28 pars, <http://www.radical-musicology.org.uk>.

⁷⁵ This is not to suggest that *différance* and *new-sense* are interchangeable terms, for the former is a non-presence which is theorised by Derrida as always being in play whilst the latter ‘is’ a felt-presence which can be absent. For Press and Reynolds, it might be said that no new-sense is found in riot grrrl-associated music, for example; rather, we might summarise that they consider that the most notable difference between, say, Led Zeppelin and Huggy Bear is that one is hard where the other is limp. For the enthusiasts of riot grrrl, however, it is perhaps just this lack of hardness, this ‘weakness’, which makes the music so appealing, so apparently full of *différance*, so much of an appealing new-sense.

tension realisation...’, and suchlike) and so on. Whether or not outsiders (the other others, one might say) may have thought the music associated with riot grrrl to be ‘a bunch of crap’ or not, the scene itself appears to have had a remarkable success at fulfilling its original aims: providing a space for young women (‘girls’) to work together and support each other and maintaining punk’s alternative to ‘mindless career-goal bands’.

Within its own micromatic bubble, then, riot grrrl was respected and recognised as being valuable. It offered a significant supplementation to the punk tradition, with a definite political agenda as well as a clear attempt to create a (female) new-sense. It could be considered to have ended when Bikini Kill split up in 1996, although I could list a number of agents from the UK and US riot grrrl scenes (band members, fanzine writers, record label owners and so on) who were active in the early 1990s and remain so today. Some from the riot grrrl scene went on to have music-industry careers, but none of these were ‘mindless’ ones in the sense that Tobi Vail probably meant in the comment quoted above. In organisations such as Ladyfest, in younger groups such as Erase Errata, New Bloods and others, the riot grrrl tradition is still being supplemented today, just as the early 1990s grrrls had built upon pre-existing punk traditions. As stated at the outset of this chapter, much of the particular supplementation I have been discussing here was over-shadowed by the rise of Nirvana and mainstream punk. I proceed now with a different 1990s strand from the punk-underground, which arrived at solutions very different from riot grrrl to the same basic problem: what do you do when an underground (part of the *raison d’être* of which is to *be* underground; that is, little known, ‘obscure’, outside of ‘straight’ society, and so on), appears to go overground? What are the political implications of

such a development in the search for a true punk underground selfdom? In short, what was a punk to do as the *fin de siècle* loomed ever closer?

Section Summary

The riot grrrl movement was closely related to the rise of mainstream punk from the outset: some of its prime-movers directly inspired the naming of the most pivotal song in the rise of Nirvana, for example. It was also, in a clear sense, a reaction against this development, however, with a commitment to independence as an operational tendency (as opposed to being ‘an assimilationist thing’, as Bikini Kill’s Kathleen Hanna has put it, see above). Even the name of the most prominent riot grrrl-related record label, Kill Rock Stars, reveals the extent to which the movement aspired to maintain certain traditional principles of punk. The musical performances discussed above, meanwhile, recall many hallmarks of the punk tradition (including, strikingly, a performance from Bikini Kill’s drummer which heavily recalls the playing of Crass’s Penny Rimbaud, for example). Nevertheless, it appears that a significant number of young women and men found something of a new-sense in the music associated with riot grrrl to the extent that they formed bands, ‘chapters’ and literally hundreds of fanzines in the course of the early 1990s. At the same time, many journalists denigrated the music associated with riot grrrl as being ‘puny’ (Press and Reynolds), in a manner which is at least questionable and which Huggy Bear in particular would appear to have found it difficult to cope with. Bikini Kill survived a little longer yet, by 1996 at least, the movement was widely felt to have finished. If riot grrrl perhaps brought forth for a moment a micro-social environment where a certain number of ‘anybodies’ felt they could do ‘it’, then, it appears that it

nevertheless went into a recoil from which what once had been a new-sense became only an inscription on the wall; the writing which might not wash off easily but, given its commitment to being 'small culture', has little if any chance of much influencing what Stephen Duncombe calls 'common culture'. The riot girl movement is ripe for comparison with the math rock scene which, likewise, can be interpreted to have been partly a response to the 1990s rise of mainstream punk.

ii. Delivering the Groceries at 128 Beats per Minute: Math Rock⁷⁶

There is an important difference between [music and mathematics]. This difference arises from the fact that musical creation is [for] performance [and] must somehow take into account the ‘other’ (in the form of the listener) because the creative input is intended to be communicated to the listener. In contrast, the mathematician’s creative activity is usually solitary... Typically, the mathematician does not need to contend with communication simultaneously with the creative phase.⁷⁷

This observation, written by a self-proclaimed professional mathematician with an interest in music (rather than the other way around), makes some presumptions about which a post-structuralist theorist might feel rather uneasy.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, his general point is worth considering: normally, music is less solitary an activity than ‘doing’ maths, less solipsistic and more communicative at least at the point of ‘creative activity’. Deferring any interesting philosophical reservations which the serious

⁷⁶ Don Caballero, ‘Delivering the Groceries at 128 Beats per Minute’, *What Burns Never Returns*, Touch and Go, TG185, 1998.

⁷⁷ Gangoli, Ramesh, ‘Music and Mathematics’ in *Perspectives of New Music* 45/2 (2007), pp.51-6, p.53 for this quotation.

⁷⁸ Namely that mathematics necessarily requires less consideration for the possibility of communicating its ‘creative phase’ than does the musical creator. Indeed, one could possibly construct an argument that Lacan’s entire utilisation of algebraic formulae was intended to undermine such an assumption. That said, Gangoli’s wording here is very careful, suggesting sensitivity to the issues post-structuralism has thrown up; his acknowledgement that mathematics involves creativity, for example, ought to allay any ‘knee-jerk’ criticism.

musicologist might want to make about such a claim, the mathematician's observation is interesting. This is particularly so given that his comments follow directly from a well-argued denial that musical sound has anything much to do with mathematics *per se*, beyond such facile correlations as the fact that both activities involve counting.

Math rock is normally presumed to be mathematical precisely because one often has to count the beats in order to make sense of the music. Its heavy use of phase-shifting makes math rock bands ripe for comparison with the minimalist method associated with composers such as Steve Reich and Phillip Glass. Yet perhaps this is only the surface of the mathematic element in math rock. The hypothesis above is that mathematical creativity is more 'solitary' by nature than, by contrast, musical creativity. Perhaps this, then, is in fact math rock's greatest difference from, say, regular rock or more typical-sounding punk: the former is less concerned with straightforward communication than the latter. Such would certainly seem to be true by comparison with the far more musically basic forms of punk already discussed above. Math rock bands rarely introduce themselves to audiences. They often perform without saying a word to the crowd. Most math rock songs have few vocal passages and many have none. Perhaps most importantly, this music is extremely complex: sinuous, reflective and subtle. Its use of counterpoint, theme and development and other compositional techniques normally associated with European art music make it rather at odds with the vast bulk of the rock and pop tradition (1970s progressive rock being the exception, a point to which I shall return below).

It is worth stating at this point that a full musicological analysis of a math rock piece is in fact already available: a richly-detailed study (though perhaps only suitable for

the reader trained in music theory) of Don Caballero's 'Stupid Puma'.⁷⁹ The title of the present section of this chapter derives from a piece by the same band, featured on their second all-instrumental double album, *What Burns Never Returns*. The LP also includes such deliberately abstruse titles as 'Slice Where You Live Like Pie', 'From the Desk of Elsewhere Go' and 'In The Absence of Strong Evidence to the Contrary, One May Step Out of the Way of the Charging Bull'. These song titles, in keeping with their evident arbitrariness and surrealism, are not included on the packaging, but only on the labels of each side of each album. The front and back covers of the package do not feature the name of the band nor of the album; indeed, only the words 'you can go up or down' are written there, printed on to a dull, green image of what appears to be a house. For the album title, band name and record label information (address, catalogue number, year of release and copywriting – the latter being attributed to 'Not The Only Music You Listen To Music (BMI)'), one must turn the sleeve sideways and read the spine. In conformity with punk underground orthodoxy, the package has no barcode on it.

If this record packaging implied only 'we don't care about the commercial niceties that major/schmindie record labels and their bands normally care about', it would not be unusual for a punk underground record. Such has been common at least since the Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch* sleeve demystified the recording process which had gone into the release, a classic piece of pro-'anyone can do it' exposure from those early

⁷⁹ Cateforis, Theo, 'How Alternative Turned Progressive: The Strange Case of Math Rock' in Holm-Hudson, Kevin, *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.243-60.

days of DIY punk.⁸⁰ Shortly thereafter Scritti Politti and the Desperate Bicycles would extend this exposure by also listing the recording costs requisite for their DIY single releases on their record sleeves (with the latter band even including the message ‘it was easy, it was cheap, go and do it’ as part of the music contained therein). Though few if any bands/labels would actually print their recording costs and so on in subsequent years, the use of record sleeves for attempted indication of difference from the mainstream industry (by printing peculiar or obscene imagery, by omitting the band name or song titles, and so on) would become a hallmark of the alternative indie scene of the late 1970s and ’80s.⁸¹ This ostensibly anti-commercial aesthetic has continued right up to the present day in the punk underground, where record sleeves often appear casually or provocatively put together.

What Burns Never Returns goes rather further, however, than simply mocking the music industry and its normativities: it makes it somewhat difficult for even the suitably-cynical agent of the punk underground to figure out what the record is actually called.⁸² In a record shop rack, a fan of Don Cab’s other releases could easily flick past *What Burns Never Returns* without even realising what they’d missed.

⁸⁰ Buzzcocks, *Spiral*, 1977. Three of the four songs are reported to have been recorded live in one take, the exception being ‘Breakdown’ which – at a time when ‘dinosaur’ rock acts were taking months to record anything – is stated to have required three takes (but ‘No Dubs’, the sleeve emphasises).

⁸¹ Paul Rosen has reported that Z Block’s ‘Is the War Over?’ compilation LP (1979) does in fact also print the expenses which went into its manufacture, “‘It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!’: Technology and anarchy in the UK music industry’ in Purkis, Jonathan, Bowen, James, *Twenty-First Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for a New Millennium* (London: Cassell, 1997), pp.99-116.

⁸² For some time I was myself under the mistaken impression that the album was called *You Can Go Up or Down*, indeed.

Something about this record's visual accoutrement suggests that the band actively resists revealing information to its (underground) audience, in other words; the sleeve wants the 'reader', as it were, to understand that nothing about this album is easy to understand, that nothing about this record is obvious, and that all communication here is blurred.

This, in brief, sums up much of what I consider to be the *raison d'être* of math rock: a concerted resistance to obviousness and an intended disruption towards musico-communicational structures. Before examining some of the musical detail involved in this resistance/disruption, however, it is natural to give some background information on how math rock came to supplement the punk movement, and to suggest why it may have been felt to be a necessary micromatic movement in the context of the early 1990s period in which it arose. Math rock is certainly perceived as a supplementary part of punk, as is reflected in Eric Davidson's jibe about 'the algebra lab of Touch and Go records' (which released *What Burns Never Returns* and Slint's *Spiderland*, amongst other canonical math rock records) enabling the label to 'become the honors class of punk, a template for the math-rock most of the Chicago scene would gravitate toward during the [1990s]'.⁸³ My concern here, further, is to ask why this gravitation should have occurred at the time it did: what led up to the arrival of math punk, why did punk come to require an 'honors class' in the 1990s and what, politically, lies behind the math punk urge to create such perceived-to-be-difficult music?

⁸³ Davidson, *We Never*, pp.62-3.

*Time Flies as a Crow Flies*⁸⁴

Punk has many beginnings. Two very obviously contrasting points of multiple-departure for it can be identified as the UK and US punk scenes, some detail of which has already been given above. In terms of the style of ensemble playing which I am describing as math rock, the latter scene can be taken as the principal ‘seed bed’, as it were. US punk, that is, was building towards the kind of sound heard on Shellac’s stylistic blueprint *At Action Park* for at least ten years prior to the album’s 1994 release. It will be appropriate, therefore, to give some indication of how this stylistic building process unfolded during that period. There is much about math rock which contradicts certain cardinal rules of punk-orientated music as established in the late 1970s; and this transgression of orthodoxy can be understood as a political gesture, in a sense which I shall attempt to elucidate here.

As is well known, there are at least some grounds for proposing that the UK 1970s punk explosion was influenced by the US scene based around the CBGBs venue in Manhattan’s Lower Eastside. Until the rise of Nirvana in 1991, however, it was less well-known that the US had developed its own punk movement essentially separate from the ‘original’ American east-coast scene. This second generation of US punk groups was largely influenced less by Patti Smith, the New York Dolls or the Dictators than it was indebted to the UK punk typified by the Damned, the Clash, Sham 69 and Crass, amongst others.⁸⁵ Since the early 1990s, a steady stream of

⁸⁴ Shellac, ‘Crow’, *At Action Park*, Touch and Go, TG141, 1994.

⁸⁵ For more detail on the influence of UK punk upon the key players in the post-1980 US punk scene, see Arnold, *Route*, 1994, Azerrad, *Our Band*, 2001, Blush, *American*, 2001 or any other well-informed

books, some of which are mentioned in the introduction to the present study, have sought to uncover the ‘secret history’ which allowed *Nevermind* to appear as if from nowhere. The pedigree, as normally reported, is from groups such as Black Flag, Minor Threat, Dead Kennedys, Hüsker Dü, Butthole Surfers and Sonic Youth. Most of these began around 1980-1 and inspired a whole subsequent generation of underground bands of which Nirvana was just one.

Through this re-telling, a once secret history has now become widely known. For many who were buying underground punk records during the 1980s, it was very difficult (especially in the 1990s) to get used to the belated prominence of groups like Minutemen and Dead Kennedys within what can reasonably be called the official history of rock.⁸⁶ Such groups were normally selling fewer than 100,000 copies of each title in the 1980s, making their records flops in major label terms. It seems

account. The particular influence of Crass upon US punk is undeniable. Blush, for example, notes the impact of Crass upon Hüsker Dü, p.225, and upon Black Flag, p.55, whilst Anderson and Jenkins report that Ian MacKaye’s influential decision to go vegetarian in 1985 was a consequence of time spent with Crass (one of his all-time favourite bands, I can report). In 2007, Jello Biafra of Dead Kennedys was still ruing the fact that he ‘never did get to see Crass or Rudimentary Peni’, *The Stool Pigeon* #13, London, Oct 2007, though he also states with evident pride that during visits to London in 1977 and ’80 he did manage to catch ‘everybody from Discharge to Bauhaus... The Sound and Monochrome Set really blew me away... Zounds with the Poison Girls’ and more. It is a strange fact that such bands are largely forgotten in the UK but remain hugely admired in the US punk underground. It is fair to say that the punk-related music which came out of the UK in the late 1970s and early 1980s remains a significant influence upon US bands today, including many whose members were actually born after Crass broke up.

⁸⁶ This is demonstrated in countless fanzines from the 1990s, *Maximum Rock’n’Roll* probably being the most prominent example.

certain that the sales success of Nirvana and other punk-associated groups in the early 1990s has brought about this anomalous situation: groups with poor sales histories (in mainstream terms) have acquired a stake in rock history less by dint of their popularity and rather on account of their influence upon popular, mainstream bands (Nirvana, Pearl Jam and many, many others). It is tempting, in the light of this, to present math rock as an attempt from the US punk movement to push the alternative rock sound back underground in the light of what was described at the time as ‘Nirvana-mania’.

There are problems with this idea, however, not least of which is that Slint’s *Spiderland* album – without doubt the single most important record in the development of the math rock sound – was recorded in mid-1990, when few if any commentators could have predicted the ‘punk explosion’ which would follow one year later.⁸⁷ The obfuscation inherent to the math rock sound should not be interpreted as a simple effect from Nirvana’s cause, therefore: the chronological facts would contradict any such claim. More accurately, it might be better said that both Nirvana and Slint were part of a movement away from the ultra-fast ‘hardcore’ rudimentary punk sound which, as noted in the discussion of riot grrrl above, had been predominant in the first half of the 1980s US scene. In other words, math rock, like riot grrrl, was partly a product of the same forces which produced Nirvana. Also comparably to the riot grrrl (micro-)movement, the success of *Nevermind* influenced both the reception of math rock bands and the stylistic/political development of the latter (micro-)scene.

⁸⁷ Slint, *Spiderland*, Touch and Go, TGLP64, 1991.

The earliest signs of this development away from the 1980s fast, hardcore punk sound are normally said to have come from the Washington DC scene based around the Dischord label. Dischord, between 1980 and 1984, had done perhaps more than any other record label to establish a blueprint for the hardcore sound with bands such as Minor Threat (featuring joint owners of Dischord Ian MacKaye and Jeff Nelson), State of Alert (with future Black Flag vocalist Henry Rollins as front man), Government Issue, Artificial Peace and so on. But by '84, in the words of Dischord's Ian MacKaye (whose Minor Threat had permanently broken up that year):

a lot of the more aggressive skinhead culture started creeping into punk rock. So the shows just became this really kind of base exercise... It was just so retarded! People who were involved with the scene, either they could fight with these new kids, or they'd just have to put up with it and watch it... One of the responses to that sort of ugly culture was to say 'I think I'll just QUIT'... Another response was to confront these people head-on and 'take back the scene'...⁸⁸

Instead, the inner-circle of Dischord punks – according to underground lore – decided to attempt a third way: simply turning away from the newer, relatively-larger punk scene and developing a micro-scene in which physical violence could be less common and musical experimentation would be more accepted. MacKaye and associates went about this aim with some enthusiasm, offering a now legendary snapshot of what punk *could* develop into: the fabled 'Revolution Summer' of 1985. Bands associated with Revolution Summer include the funky and political Beefeater; the relatively slow (by hardcore standards) and decidedly passionate Rites of Spring; MacKaye's own

⁸⁸ Quoted in Farseth, *Wipe*, p.46, capitalisation retained from original.

Embrace, again with slower tempi than might have been expected from a Dischord band and a distinct note of anguish in the vocal performance; Lunchmeat; Dag Nasty; and others.

It would be a mistake to think Revolution Summer the first attempt to broaden punk's musical palette, however; there had and have always been bands and individuals pushing at the stylistic boundaries of this area of music. Nor was it the first critique of the tendencies towards violence and general machismo within the US scene; Calvin Johnson's Olympia, Washington-based Beat Happening (a significant correlate of the cutie scene, as noted in chapter three above) had been critical of these tendencies for some time by the summer of '85, as had other US groups and individuals for whom DC punk had already been considered to be 'retarded' long before MacKaye came to the same conclusion. Nevertheless, the Revolution Summer gesture was certainly a significant one, as much as anything because it came from the heart of the US punk underground: MacKaye's Minor Threat were already perceived at that time as the ultimate angry, loud, fast, hardcore punk group, 'the Beatles of hardcore', according to Gina Arnold.⁸⁹

From the ranks of two particular Revolution Summer groups – Rites of Spring and Embrace – grew the band which is probably the single most important group from the punk underground (Crass would be their only obvious rivals for this title). Fugazi was formed in mid-1987 by Ian MacKaye on vocals and guitar, Brendan Canty on drums, Joe Lally on bass and (shortly after the band began playing live as a trio) Guy Picciotto on vocals and guitar. Fugazi's immense importance to the US scene was

⁸⁹ Arnold, *Route*, p.50.

largely consequent to their resolute independence, despite extraordinary sales and the large number of previously-underground bands signing to major labels in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Releasing a string of albums through the Dischord label, with little or no advertising promotion nor radio plugging (and certainly no promo videos, though a self-released documentary *Instrument* was issued in 1998), Fugazi's accumulated sales are reported to be well in excess of a million. The self-managed band determinedly controlled the ticket prices at its shows, which – like their album prices – were kept exceptionally low.⁹⁰ Autonomy and self-reliance were a crucial part of Fugazi's approach: merchandise was not available at their performances; mainstream rock magazines were routinely denied interviews; audience violence was generally dealt with by the band itself rather than by 'bouncers'; and so on.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Fugazi albums are still available for only \$10 mail-order within the US; their ticket prices were capped at the extraordinarily low \$6 until they ceased performing live in 2001. A ticket my wife has retained from a 1999 London show indicates a £6 fee, slightly higher than the band were charging in the US at that time but still exceptionally low for its day. Fugazi routinely refused to play venues which resisted their low door-price policy, even by-passing certain key cities in the US on the grounds that a suitable venue willing to accommodate their policy could not be found.

⁹¹ For example, when my band Red Monkey supported Fugazi at Newcastle's Riverside club in May 1999, MacKaye dealt with 'stage divers' himself despite the fact that some of these audience members, frankly, did not look the type whom the faint-hearted would be well-advised to confront. When we mentioned to Ian afterwards that this was an impressive action, he commented casually that this was nothing compared to what he and the other band members would deal with at many other shows. It is also worth reporting that he then personally collected the door receipts and paid us an extraordinarily generous cut of the money considering that the sold-out show was of course filled with Fugazi fans, only a tiny percentage of whom might have been familiar with Red Monkey.

Gina Arnold was well-justified when she stated in 1994 that ‘in some circles, punk rock circles... just the word *Fugazi* is a green lantern-like talisman, like saying “Jahweh” in ancient Egypt, or wearing garlic next to your skin’.⁹² Though the band ceased releasing records and performing live in 2001, its reputation as the ultimate underground punk band remains thoroughly intact. Fugazi never compromised on its stated ideals and the few criticisms of the band I have heard – such as that the members behaved like rock stars, or that they would tell others how to behave – are inconsistent with an overwhelming amount of evidence to the contrary.⁹³

The importance of the band in musical terms is related to its origins in Washington DC’s Revolution Summer of 1985: Fugazi showed that punk could slow down, that it could utilise a much broader dynamic range and that it could encompass far greater rhythmic complexity. It is the latter element which is particularly important in the progression toward the math rock sound. Fugazi’s rhythms, from their earliest work onwards, exhibited a metric subtlety far beyond that of the ultra-fast marching beat normal to the hardcore sound. Songs like ‘Waiting Room’, ‘Bulldog Front’ and ‘Suggestion’ owed something to dub reggae, with their sparse bass parts and heavy emphasis upon the backbeat, yet also went beyond that musical genre by introducing elements of harmonic dissonance, occasional poly-metres and the rasped

⁹² Arnold, *Route*, p.207.

⁹³ Refusing to tolerate certain forms of behaviour, particularly when the behaviour in question threatens the well-being of others, is not quite the same as telling other people how to behave, although this nuance rarely seemed to be noticed by those audience members who would regularly harangue the band at Fugazi gigs I attended in the 1990s. Fugazi’s efforts to avoid acting like rock stars, meanwhile, are legendary and have generally been very much supported by the band’s inter-personal relations with ‘fans’ I have been able to observe at close hand several times over the last fifteen years.

vocals/distorted guitars typical to hardcore punk. Over time, Fugazi also introduced multiple compound time signatures to their music, taking it further still from the style of performance normally thought of as the essence of punk.

If Fugazi offered something of a green light for musical experimentation, however, it took some time for many others within the US punk underground to follow their lead. Some of the earliest bands to do so are associated with the 'emo' (short for emotional) sub-cultural tag. Moss Icon, for example, who hailed from the same general locality as the Dischord label, are considered to be (after Rites of Spring) one of the first post-hardcore 'emo' bands. Featuring a somewhat slower and rhythmically relatively-adventurous sound, Moss Icon's untitled LP, recorded in 1988 but unreleased until 1993, bears an unmistakable influence from the Dischord stable of bands. Retaining elements of the screamed vocals and political reference points of the hardcore style, the guitar-work includes a number of extended phrases whilst songs like 'Lyburnum Wit's End' are almost as long as, for example, the entirety of the Circle Jerks early-1980s hardcore classic *Group Sex* LP.⁹⁴

Some retrospective opinion on the 'emo-core' of groups such as Moss Icon and Rites of Spring has been dismissive, though this may have as much to do with a semantic transformation of the term in the late 1990s and after.⁹⁵ Yet the adjustment of punk's

⁹⁴ Moss Icon, *Untitled LP*, Vermiform, VERMIFORM 13, 1993 (recorded 1988); Circle Jerks, *Group Sex*, Frontier, FLP1002, 1980.

⁹⁵ Latterly, 'emo' has come to signify a quite different style of music from that to which it was first applied, with bands like Jimmy Eat World typifying the more recent style. It is likely that this change was the product of successive supplementations: certainly Moss Icon and Rites of Spring inspired numerous US groups such as the Native Nod and a number of bands associated with the Gravity label

musical orthodoxy was certainly influential, with even groups such as Born Against – a politically-charged East coast hardcore group which would eventually feature an ex-member of Moss Icon within its line-up – showing some musical influence from the emo sound.⁹⁶ Overall, then, there is much to justify the significant place allocated to the Revolution Summer moment in the development towards the math rock sound of the 1990s.

If Fugazi *et al* can be attributed a critical importance in this broadening of the US punk underground's musical palette, however, it can hardly be said that Slint's landmark album *Spiderland* – the most crucial album in the development of the math rock style, as noted – follows logically from the style of the bands discussed above. On the contrary, very little in the canon of rock music (and certainly not Slint's previous album, 1989's unremarkable *Tweez*) could be said to have led logically towards the sound contained therein. The pre-Geffen albums by New York's Sonic Youth, that said, offer some stylistic elements which may well have influenced

of San Diego, as well as UK groups such as Bob Tilton and Tribute. Some of these groups moved the sound away from the hardcore style which had birthed it and towards the 'indie-rock' sound with which it is normally associated today. As a result, the emo descriptor has become decidedly denigratory in the underground, though this was not always the case. It is worth noting that Bianca, a prominent 'chav' character in BBC TV soap opera *Eastenders*, was scripted to comment that she 'look[ed] emo' in a summer 2009 episode, showing how firmly mainstreamised the descriptor has now become.

⁹⁶ For example, 'Eulogy' – recorded in spring 1990 – displays a markedly slower tempo than one might have expected just a few years earlier. The distinctly 'tortured' vocal styling and extended guitar phrases are also typical of the earlier emo punk sound (Born Against, *The Rebel Sound of Shit and Failure*, Vermiform, VMFM 20, 1995).

Slint.⁹⁷ But even these recordings, and others comparable to them from the same period, could hardly be said to have cut an obvious path towards the distinctive sound of *Spiderland*.⁹⁸

Though this Slint album is difficult to over-estimate in its importance for the development of the math rock sound, I will say little more about it here, for several reasons. Firstly, there is a wealth of vernacular discussions of the LP available on-line and in music magazines and fanzines. Secondly, the music is too dense in its development of thematic material to be satisfactorily discussed in the available space. Thirdly, and most importantly, *Spiderland* influenced the later math rock bands but is less typical of the general style than the piece by Shellac which I discuss below.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Most specifically, Sonic Youth's double album *Daydream Nation*, Blast First, BFFP34, 1988 contains a number of extended passages of dissonant instrumental melodicism comparable to (though less complex than) the motifs used on *Spiderland*. Rhythmically, however, the former band shows none of the poly-metric complexity which Slint would produce just two years after *Daydream Nation*.

⁹⁸ Other bands which are known to have formed a milieu around Slint include Squirrel Bait (featuring three of the future members of Slint), Bitch Magnet and Bastro. Again, however, there is a large gap between such bands and the style of *Spiderland*.

⁹⁹ For example, the third section of Slint's 'Nosferatu Man' (the second track on *Spiderland*) combines a basic hard-rock hi-hat, kick and snare pattern in 4/4 time with a guitar pattern in 12/8 weaving across it. The effect has been copied by countless lesser bands in the math rock style in the ensuing years, but few if any capture the kind of complexity with which Slint deliver the riff. Switching the metric base between 4/4, 5/4 and 6/4 with an exceptionally smooth musicality, it really is a remarkable piece of ensemble playing from Slint – so subtle is its brilliance that it is barely worth describing; the interested reader is encouraged, rather, to listen to the recording and make their own judgement.

In fact, Slint's music is as much associated with what is known as *post rock* as it is with math rock. It is probably worth discussing some general differences between post rock and math rock in order to clarify this divergence. Broadly, then, we can summarise that post rock is understood to encompass a wider range of groups and sounds, often including electronic special effects. According to James A. Hodgkinson, it can be typified as 'guitar-driven instrumental music that was altered or treated using effects or studio techniques and backed up by analogue synthesisers and nonconventional rock instruments'.¹⁰⁰

Though it is unclear as to why Hodgkinson places this summary in the past tense (given that post rock remains a common contemporary descriptor), the definition is otherwise fairly sound. Bands described as math rock are also often 'guitar-driven', but they tend not to promote the 'nonconventional rock instruments' and timbral experimentations listed above. On the contrary, the math rock bands utilise the classic rock band format of guitar, bass, drums and – sometimes – vocals. Because of this, math rock is more obviously a continuation from the punk tradition where, despite various claims to breaking with the orthodoxies of rock music, the classic rock band formation has remained overwhelmingly normal. Post rock, on the other hand, is less firmly linked to punk and rock orthodoxies of this type, as noted by Theo Cateforis:

While its precise roots are unknown, math rock can be dated at least as far back as the late 1980s when it was first applied to a small number of mid-Atlantic and mid-Western American 'college town' bands such as Butterglove, Breadwinner,

¹⁰⁰ Hodgkinson, James A., 'The Fanzine Discourse Over Post-rock', in Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, pp.221-237: 222.

Honor Role, Slint and Bitch Magnet, *steeped in the punk and underground scenes* of cities such as Richmond, Virginia and Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁰¹

Noting Shellac, Don Caballero, Shudder to Think and others as 1990s inheritors of the math-rock style, Cateforis queries whether the descriptor should be applied to ‘other recent “indie” artists such as Tortoise, The Sea and Cake, Rachel’s, and June of ’44, among others’.¹⁰² His dubiousness is based on the fact that the latter bands’ ‘textures are much lighter, the instrumentation more varied, the mathematical component of “counting” less prominently used, and their timbres largely devoid of the powerful guitar crunch’ of the bands he prefers to foreground as being more typical exponents of math rock.¹⁰³ Though he selects the term ‘indie’ to describe these allegedly not-really-math-rock other bands, he could perhaps more appropriately have chosen the term post rock given that the descriptor ‘indie’ has such semantic plurality in application, as noted in chapters one and three above.

Nevertheless, Cateforis acknowledges a certain crossover between the math rock bands and what we can call the post rock axis, namely that ‘all of these bands are aligned by a certain experimental attitude, and a desire to expand popular music’s language through the addition of such elements as jazz, classical music, and electronics’.¹⁰⁴ It is notable, in this respect, that Cateforis’s study is published within an anthology of articles re-assessing the *progressive rock* of groups such as Yes, Pink

¹⁰¹ Cateforis in Holm-Hudson, *Progressive*, p.244, emphasis added.

¹⁰² Ibid: p.257.

¹⁰³ Ibid: p.257.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Floyd and, especially, King Crimson. Echoed in most of the articles therein, the introduction reiterates a well-known point about the general relationship between ‘prog’ and punk: ‘When punk became an ascendant force in popular culture in 1976-7, the excesses and high-cultural pretensions of progressive rock made it an easy target, hastening its demise.’¹⁰⁵

It is in this sense that the development of math rock was decidedly transgressive of one of the punk scene’s cardinal rules. Where the 1970s prog groups had displayed a relatively impressive musical complexity, this had been precisely the stick with which the punks had beaten an older generation: since the Pistols et al had shown that it did not require a huge amount of instrumental dexterity to create music which others could enjoy, the punks seemed to have shown that *anyone can do it*. The older generation (more like older brothers than uncles, when one considers that *Dark Side of the Moon* was issued a mere three years before ‘Anarchy in the UK’), *ergo*, were boring old farts; it was far more interesting to get up and perform than to nod along to a twenty minute guitar or drum solo, no matter how mesmerising the player’s technique, the punks seemed to declare as one.

Math rock is relatively complex music. Not just anyone can do it, because to perform its ‘harsh, propulsive rhythms’ and ‘mesmerising complexities’ – indeed, even to just listen to them – requires effort, concentration and a degree of rehearsal.¹⁰⁶ The break with a crucial aesthetic of the punk tradition is unarguable. Intrigue remains, nevertheless, as to whether this music could still legitimately call itself punk, on the

¹⁰⁵ Holm-Hudson, *Progressive*, p.2.

¹⁰⁶ Cateforis in Holm-Hudson, *Progressive*, p.259.

one hand, and, on the other, as to why this shift in musical substance should have occurred in the late-1980s/early-'90s period specifically: what had changed?

Why 1991?

So far my presentation of the development towards math rock has admittedly been a somewhat historicist one, in which the progression towards a musical new-sense would appear to be traceable through consecutive supplementations. It is important to be aware, however, that the relative complexity of the '70s progressive rock sound was always a repressed element threatening to return despite its ostensible decapitation around '77.¹⁰⁷ Thus a group such as the Stranglers, often thought to be part of punk, could offer some comparatively advanced rhythmic elements (their late single 'Golden Brown', which reached number two on the chart in 1982, may be the only hit single ever to feature multiple compound time signatures) along with markedly tricky-to-perform keyboard flourishes far beyond the capabilities of the beginners the movement was supposed to have encouraged.¹⁰⁸ Closer to the heart of punk, the early songs of Adam and the Ants (whose connections with the Sex Pistols and Siouxsie and the Banshees are well-known, and who are said to have been considered by many as Crass's main rivals in 1979¹⁰⁹) certainly have some significant musical complexities: for example, 'Cartrouble (parts 1 & 2)' features intricate poly-

¹⁰⁷ A four page spread on 'the guilty listening pleasures' of first wave punk bands in *Mojo* magazine reveals the Sex Pistols, Damned, Clash, PiL and others to have been influenced by the likes of Deep Purple, Free, Egg, Magma, Yes, Mott the Hoople and even Jim Reeves, *Mojo*, issue 151, June 2006, pp.76-9.

¹⁰⁸ The Stranglers, 'Golden Brown', 7", Liberty, BP407, 1982.

¹⁰⁹ Berger's *The Story of Crass* makes this claim very stridently, for example.

rhythmics, subtle use of dissonance and a decidedly grand overall structural scheme.

‘Car Trouble’ and ‘Golden Brown’, in other words, were certainly not the products of groups of absolute beginners.¹¹⁰

Indeed, much of the music from the 1978-84 period which Simon Reynolds wants to delimit as ‘postpunk’ (see chapter three above) amounts to little more than partial returns of the experimentalism of the prog era. Not anyone, to clarify the point, could play like Devo, Wire or even Gang of Four guitarist Andy Gill – the requisite instrumental prowess went well beyond ’70s punk’s famous ‘here’s a chord, here’s another, here’s a third, now form a band’ formula. Even the genuine instrumental novices of the era in question – Fire Engines, the Flowers, the Mekons and so on – mustered a prowess as an ensemble which few can attain, though admittedly many have tried. Within the US punk underground *milieu* which would eventually produce Slint, Shellac and so on, on the other hand, many pre-1990s groups made moves towards a musical experimentalism comparable to that of the progressive rock heyday. Mission of Burma, for example, featured a classically-trained composer and electronically-generated sound effects inspired directly from art music’s avant-garde. Minutemen’s frenetic brevity disguised a distinctly advanced musicality, meanwhile. Nomeansno’s ‘It’s Catching Up’ (lead track on 1989’s *Wrong* LP), furthermore, is

¹¹⁰ Adam and the Ants, ‘Cartrouble (parts 1 & 2)’, *Dirk*. Although the two main sections of ‘Cartrouble’ amount to little more than two separate and unrelated songs sandwiched together with a brief drum break, the piece remains structurally complex compared with 99% of other material in the punk canon; in any case, sandwiching of such dubiously-related musical material is a hall-mark of the progressive rock style from the Who and the Beatles’ pseudo-operatic pretensions onwards.

remarkably close to the sound Shellac would produce on *At Action Park* half a decade later – complex, multivalent and stylistically progressive.¹¹¹

The musical complexity math rock brought to the wider punk underground may in fact have underlined a truism of which the scene had (has) always been in denial: perhaps it actually takes *more* than the basic reproduction of three chords to make *good* punk (not just anyone can do it, in other words). The historicist account of math rock's development would therefore appear to be an incomplete one precisely because the new-sense it steadily brought to punk was in fact far from novel when considered within a wider history of rock and pop (King Crimson, for example, beat Slint to the idea of developing ultra-complex rhythms, melodies and harmonies, as the context of Cateforis' article indicates).

This problem with the historicist account should not be brushed aside too easily, for it is a significant one indeed in terms of the arguments posited in chapter two above.

Neither, however, should it be accepted too quickly, for quite the same reason. When, for example, Fugazi brought to the US scene the new-sense idea that punk could slow

¹¹¹ Nomeansno, 'It's Catching Up', *Wrong*, Alternative Tentacles, VIRUS 77, 1989. The opening bars are so much like Shellac that I have successfully fooled friends into believing the song to be a rare and unreleased track by the aforementioned band. Admittedly the recording falls posterior to Fugazi's earliest releases, yet it would be a mistake to presume Nomeansno's progressive sound is a consequence of the Dischord band's innovations: for one thing, Nomeansno's first album, issued in 1984, displays comparable experimentalism at a time when McKaye et al were still performing rudimentary loud-fast hardcore. There is, in fact, ample evidence to suggest that Nomeansno – along with other non-US associates the Ex, the Dog Faced Hermans, de Kift and so on – influenced Fugazi and not at all the other way around, with the latter band having frequently paid homage to these groups.

down a little, perhaps they undermined the possibility that anyone could do it for the simple reason that (as most musicians realise) it is often much harder to play slowly than to play at a fast tempo. Perhaps, on the other hand, they thereby encouraged a wider welcome to individuals beyond the existing punk underground microcosm (girls, for example, or people who prefer musical variety – the agents of the subsequent riot grrrl and math rock scenes, in other words).

I will return to this critical general issue (the problematic nature of *empowerment through novelty*, essentially) in the thesis conclusion below. For now, it might be sufficient to suggest that Fugazi's particular supplementation of the punk trace *had to* arrive when it did (around 1988) and, if their music can be said to have undermined the possibility that 'anyone can do it' on at least some level, it is widely felt amongst Fugazi's hundreds of thousands of fans that there remains something very inclusive and very *just* about this particular band.

Why, by comparison then, should Slint's *Spiderland* album have arrived at the moment in which it did? Why, furthermore, should it have influenced so many subsequent groups – Shellac certainly included, as the band's guitarist Steve Albini has repeatedly acknowledged – to attempt to re-produce its musical complexity *in the early 1990s specifically*? After all, the progressive musicality of the earlier bands just mentioned – Adam and the Ants, Mission of Burma and so on – certainly did not inspire a legion of bands to attempt to copy their intricacies in the way that Slint, by contrast, certainly did. Why did Slint's complex music seem just right to so many in the 1990s?

Perhaps it is possible to suggest a reason. From 1991 onwards, underground punk was faced with a drastic problem: the sense of ‘otherness’ upon which punk identity was largely predicated could hardly be maintained at a moment in which nearly all mainstream periodicals, including those which rarely mentioned rock music of any kind, were now running lengthy articles on punk/grunge/Nirvana. It seems feasible, therefore, that the move towards musical complexity demonstrated by the math rock bands was, at least partly, an attempt to go ‘further out’ than a perceived mainstream audience could. In a scholarly account with a strong interest in underground punk, John Goshert has implied as much: mentioning specifically ‘the shift in music that came out of D.C. in the mid-to-late 1980s’ (Revolution Summer, that is), Goshert states that ‘these bands shifted the political focus of the music from opposition to a more diffuse and avant-garde strategy’.¹¹² The question remains, however, as to what this ‘avant-garde strategy’ expresses opposition *to* (if anything; and surely the invocation of a ‘strategy’ for a ‘political focus’ would suggest that Goshert thinks *something* must be being struggled over). Politically, it is clear from the evidence offered above that, for Ian MacKaye and other agents within DC’s punk micro-community, the strategy was at least partly one of differentiation from the ‘new kids’ who were perceived to be ‘so retarded’ in their understanding of what punk is: the Revolution Summer bands, in other words, appear to have been opposed to the enlargement (and perceived dilution/invasion) of their scene.

This is not to criticise MacKaye et al, necessarily, for the problem of violence from skinheads in the mid-1980s US punk underground is well-known and hardly

¹¹² Goshert, John, “Punk After the Pistols: American Music, Economics, and Politics in the 1980s and 1990s’, *Popular Music and Society*, 24/1 (2000), pp.85-106: 91.

something which ought to have been tacitly accepted. Nevertheless, if it is the case that this was the principal reason for the mid-1980s shift in question, it seems likely that the extended shift towards diffusion and avant-gardism of the early 1990s was comparable in its motivation. The similarity between the two moments is highlighted in the opening paragraphs of the 1994 special edition of *Maximum Rock'n'Roll* fanzine, entitled *Major Labels: Some of Your Friends are Already This Fucked* (the sub-title appearing to be a comment on the then-recent suicide of Kurt Cobain; an impression compounded by the accompanying front-cover picture of a person pointing a gun into their own mouth, though the editorial claims the image was chosen prior to the Nirvana singer's death):

Within the last two years, nazi skinheads have beaten up at least 50 underground bands, have destroyed punk clubs and forced their way onto radio programs, have punched out zine editors, label owners and indie distributors. They threaten to stifle and ultimately control this community, and little is being done to resist this threat.

'Oops, wait a minute here...', the editorial proceeds in mock self-correction. 'Oh, that was a column from 6 years ago. Well, let's do a little substituting and update this sucker...':

Within the last two years, major labels have bought up at least 50 underground bands, have undermined punk clubs and bought their way onto radio programs, have bought off zine editors, label owners and indie distributors. They threaten

to stifle and ultimately control this community, and little is being done to resist this threat.¹¹³

Under the aegis of its vociferous then-editor Tim Yohannon, *MR'n'R*'s solution to this problem was to attempt a somewhat Stalinist purge of all semblances of post-1980s developments in the punk underground: maintaining its long-held refusal to review any record funded in any way by the majors, as well as those featuring barcodes on their sleeves, the zine also developed a notoriously essentialist policy with regard to musical style. This amounted to a refusal to review any records which did not conform to a 'faster, louder, harder' conception of what punk is (or should be).

Math rock, though not quite the opposite of the *MR'n'R* solution, contrasts strongly as strategy: whilst both would appear to provide some opposition to the majors' mainstreaming of punk (recall that Don Caballero's *What Burns Never Returns* features no barcode, as noted above, for example), the math rock groups can reasonably be understood to have shunned the established punk musical style and instead to have kept only the punk underground operational tendency. Both strategies are somewhat unsatisfactory, however: after *Nevermind*, the 'them and us' conception of social difference at the heart of an earlier US punk identity had become very difficult to accept, hence Cateforis's observation that math rock 'today stands on the broken rubble of the glaring audience dichotomies that once helped define 1980s alternative music'.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ *Maximum Rock'n'Roll* #133, Yohannon, Tim, et al, Berkeley, California, USA, 1994, p.2, emphasis retained.

¹¹⁴ Cateforis in Holm-Hudson, *Progressive*, p.258.

It would be an error to think of the pivotal significance of *Nevermind* as a product of some magical musical, social or political power residing in the hands of Nirvana. On the contrary, it would be fair to guess that, should the album never have been released, some other group's album would likely have fulfilled a comparable role. Around that time, after all, the Berlin Wall had been demolished, the first Iraq War had begun, Thatcher and Reagan – crucial emblems of 'them' for the 1980s UK and US punk's 'us'-sense – were out of office, and so on. Globalisation was entering a new phase which, in the opinion of some voices of the day, appeared to indicate an 'end of history'. Right-wingers, as many perceived it at the time, had manoeuvred the Left into a position where all dissidence appeared to be folly.

Where did all this leave the punks? Undoubtedly in a very confusing position, by 1991. From that year onwards, an underground punk movement based above all else on *independence from the mainstream* found itself in a cultural environment whose leading commentators were often proposing that there was no longer anything to oppose – and no longer any opposition, or allegedly no coherent one. For Nirvana, the self-proclaimed 'negative creeps', commercial success in such a context makes a certain kind of sense. The same context, I contend, is what also makes math rock make sense – for inverted reasons. According to Cateforis, 'math rock has come increasingly to simply mean "difficult" music'.¹¹⁵ That given, it is fair to presume that the music was suitable for difficult times; for oppositionalists of any type, the 1990s certainly amounted to such. Math rock, one might say, is the sound of music made by self-perceived outsiders in a society which claimed no longer to have any outside. It

¹¹⁵ Ibid: p.257.

represents a determined attempt to go beyond the boundaries of a musical mainstream which now wanted to think itself to be as boundlessly liberal as the political mainstream was now supposed to be. Math rock was perhaps mathematical in that sense most of all: its creative phase was less centred upon communication than any previous form of punk had been; ‘you cannot make sense of this’, the music and artwork of a group like Don Caballero seems to say (or, to put it another way, *not* anyone can listen to it; not just anyone).

It is appropriate, therefore, to give some details as to the sound of such music, in order to suggest certain sonic elements which may have encouraged the feeling of dislocation and attendant sense of communicative inarticulacy which, I would argue, are at the heart of math rock. Two brief case studies, then: the first, it is fair to say, is a fairly archetypal example of math rock; the second, from the late 1990s, is less typical of the math rock scene but shows something of the way in which punk-orientated music, twenty years after the Sex Pistols’ interview with Bill Grundy, had developed a surprisingly polite and intricate musicality. (Tracks 7 and 8 should be listened to before proceeding.)

*Boche’s Dick*¹¹⁶

A four beat count-in introduces the song, but this is far from the ‘One, Two, Three, Four’ which Dee Dee Ramone would shout at the outset of each Ramones song. Rather, the count is provided by two drumsticks clicked together at a tempo slow enough for the mind to imagine any number of subdivisions of each beat (4/4, 6/8,

¹¹⁶ ‘Boche’s Dick’, Shellac, *Action*.

12/8 or even 16/16 would all be easy enough for the average musician to deduce from the clicks, with 4/4 being perhaps the hardest of these to actually deliver at such a slow tempo).

Even this count in, then, goes against certain notable traditions of not only punk particular but also rock and pop more generally: it does not set up a clear and simple metric framework for listeners and performers to follow; rather, the ultra-slow count in offers a heavy dose of uncertainty as regards what is to follow. This feeling is only compounded as the bass guitar and drumkit combine to perform the opening phrase, twice, prior to the entrance of the guitar. Let us take each of the four preparatory clicks from the drumsticks, for discursive purposes, to be a crotchet with the time signature being 4/4. Can we now say that the drums and bass are following this metric pattern?

The question is utterly typical of the kind of rhythmic problem thrown up by the music of math rock. In order to begin to address the question, let us firstly consider the bass riff (see example 6, using the given time signature and notation in general as, in this example, a deliberate attempt to avoid a one dimensional interpretation of the riff's phrase structure¹¹⁷). The riff moves from a low D (the bottom string of the bass appears to have been down-tuned two semi-tones from the E fundamental which would normally provide a rock bassist's lowest pitch) up to the minor third above it

¹¹⁷ The listener can recognise, for example, that the Ds are all emphasised, implying a triplet phrasing. However, the avoidance of presenting the notation in groups of three (perhaps with a two bar presentation enabled by placing a separate time signature in the second bar; 6/8 followed by 5/8, for example) is intended to encourage a plurality of possible interpretations with regard to this piece's musical phrasing.

(F-natural). This is repeated six times before the player closes his phrase up the octave with a C to D slide. Taking each opening drumstick click as a crotchet, the phrase takes five and a half of these ‘crotchets’, or eleven full crotchets for the completion of the full opening section (it being two phrases in length) prior to the intrusion of the six string guitar. Is the time signature $5\frac{1}{2}/4$, then?



It would be awkward indeed to claim such a time signature to be a suitable metric measurement. For one thing, it is abundantly clear that both bassist and drummer are not in fact counting in these ‘crotchets’ at all, despite the drummer’s count-in. Rather, they are effectively performing according to diminutive pulses which, taking each count-in click as a crotchet, we can describe as semi-quavers (as in example 6). Counting the pulses of their phrasing on this basis, it is easy to see that the rhythm section are essentially ‘riffing’ on a pattern of three semi-quavers for each strong beat (the latter being delivered with an emphatic fundamental D on the bass).

A further problem with this reading, in a metric sense, however, is that the drummer’s rolling phrase offers a clear strong beat for every six semi-quavers; he is certainly *not*, in other words, counting in threes. This is recognisable in his use of a prominent snare shot on the fifth semi-quaver of each group of six. (These snare shots are performed as a ‘flam’ and thus recall the heavy playing of Led Zeppelin’s John Bonham; a notable example of math rock’s broad transgression of the ‘1977 year zero’ orthodoxy

previously common to the punk movement.) The drummer, therefore, can reasonably be argued to be basing his phrasing around groups of six ‘semi-quavers’ (6/16, strictly speaking).

It is obvious, then, that from the outset this piece is polyrhythmic in a clear and identifiable sense: the two players in the rhythm section are not only somewhat pulling away from each other, but their phrasing would imply multiple metres even as isolated performances, thanks to the supplementation at the end of each phrase: the C-D slide offered an octave above the main section of the bass riff, on the one hand, and the general poly-rhythmic duality of the drum part, on the other hand. As the guitar intrudes, the multivalence is only compounded. Two different guitar phrases are offered, each played twice. The first supports the drums’ principal rhythm with a fairly tricky winding pattern requiring the player to pick out an open D string whilst performing, at a guess, around the instrument’s fifth to eighth frets. The second supports the thrusting bass riff. Both are rooted around A-natural, recalling the ‘open fifths’ of pre-Bach medieval harmony against the D-centred bass pattern.

If ‘read’ as a two bar count-in at a 2/2 metre, the opening clicks might encourage us to then speak of the subsequent phrases, up to here, as also suggesting a folk-ish 6/8 polyrhythmic sub-metre. All such folk-ish swing disappears, however, as two snare cracks signal a shift of rhythmic emphasis 36 seconds into the track, and something of a *hard-rock* riff-pattern marches in to the frame. The felt-movement towards hard rock is accompanied, however, by further poly-metric complexity: if we assign these two snare cracks as quavers, the thrust of the guitar/bass riff would be towards triplet

semi-quavers.¹¹⁸ The percussionist, meanwhile, in an impressive feat of what (after chapter two above) we might call ‘split-subject’ playing, manages to imply both rhythms simultaneously.

Even as it ‘rocks out’, then, the piece retains a rhythmic complexity. You can bang your head to it quite easily, certainly; but if one follows the main thrust of the riff, one needs to give two slightly faster head-bangs at the close of the phrase if one is to stay with the game. It is for this reason that it is quite legitimate to talk of math rock as having brought a paradigmatic shift within punk specifically and rock generally: the rules of the rocking-out game are a little different than those of earlier paradigms; math rock cannot be evaluated according to quite the same criteria as the overwhelming majority of rock and punk musics which came before it.

Harmonically, ‘Boche’s Dick’ is nothing too exceptional. The remainder of the song is satisfying enough, with the bass and guitar continuing to operate mostly in an open fifth harmony as they weave through some pleasing progressions (and perhaps surprisingly ‘functional’ ones, come to that). These harmonic progressions are based around the minor pentatonic scale, it is worth noting; the scale most loved by blues-rock groups such as Led Zeppelin, whose music Shellac (the performers of ‘Boche’s

¹¹⁸ A word of precision as to the normal musical meaning of the term ‘triplet’ may be useful here. Some vernacular discussions of rhythm apply the term to rhythms involving any instance of a count-in-threes pattern (the Waltz, for example, or the 6/8 pattern of many ‘slow rock’ and folk songs). Strictly speaking, however, a triplet involves the ‘forcing’, as it were, of three pulses where there should be two. Quaver triplets therefore involve three pulses covering one crotchet beat, where normally a crotchet would divide into only two quavers; semi-quaver triplets divide a quaver into three parts instead of two; and so on. Such is the case in the piece of music described above.

Dick') recalls to a significant extent. Lyrically, there is also nothing here of great substance; indeed, the words are often difficult to ascertain. It is interesting, however, that Shellac's vocalist (the infamous Steve Albini, producer of recordings by Nirvana, Fugazi and Led Zeppelin's Page and Plant, as well as guitarist/vocalist in the significant punk-orientated band Big Black) seems to close the song with a disparaging reference to the 'mark of a man': a belated note of sympathy with the Riot Grrrls who were active at the time this song was recorded, perhaps.¹¹⁹

In math rock overall and the music of Shellac in particular, however, it is fair to say that lyrics are far from the salient element of content: time, rather, is the critical musical ingredient, I would argue. Math rock marks time as multivalent, ambiguous, yet consistent in its inconsistencies. Rhythmically, then, math rock is distinctive from nearly all previous rock music, the odd exception being the likes of Frank Zappa, Captain Beefheart, King Crimson and a very few others. Even jazz has produced few individuals or ensembles which have deconstructed rhythmic sense in quite the same way that Shellac do on 'Boche's Dick' and on other pieces from their landmark album *At Action Park*.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Perhaps not, though. Shellac vocalist/guitarist Steve Albini might feasibly have desired some form of armistice, given the furore he had caused through the choice of name for his pre-Shellac/post-Big Black group: Rapeman. Albini is an expert in the politics of transgression, that said, and is not given to contrite behaviour as a rule (in his defence, we can at least say that the man shows a strong interest in the nature of masculinity and that his occasional lack of clear disapproval with regard to certain forms of male behaviour does not, in itself, necessarily indicate approval of such, nevertheless).

¹²⁰ Exceptions would be jazz drummers such as Elvin Jones from the classic line-up of the Coltrane Quartet, or Art Blakey; players who make even a percussionist like Shellac's Todd Trainer (outstanding though he is in the punk field) sound like something of a novice in terms of poly-metric

With this album, Shellac inspired a legion of subsequent groups to experiment with poly-metric approaches to the game of rhythm. Within a year or two of the album's release, for example, the UK boasted many bands which can reasonably be described as math rock in their general orientation, such as Bob Tilton (from Nottingham), Reid (Glasgow), Baby Harp Seal, Bilge Pump and Polaris (all from Leeds), and others. In the US, labels such as Gravity, Touch and Go and of course Dischord were releasing many dozens of bands with the kinds of tightly performed multi-meters identified in the Shellac piece in question. By the late 1990s, the kind of 'noodly' performance heard on 'Boche's Dick' was no longer surprising. Complex ensemble performances, by that time, were increasingly common in the punk underground, yet ten years earlier the scene had still been populated primarily by straightforward hardcore groups and musically basic garage bands with little or no instrumental dexterity. In order to illustrate the extent to which this became the case, I turn next to a piece from 1998 which, on a musical level, involves playing which it is extremely doubtful that 'anyone could do'.

complexity. In terms of ensemble work, the obvious precursor of Shellac from the jazz milieu would be the Dave Brubeck Quartet, with pieces such as 'Blue Rondo á la Turk' (mostly in a varying form of 9/8), 'Take Five' (in 5/4) and 'Three to Get Ready' (which vacillates consistently between two bars of 3/4 then two of 4/4), *Time Out*, LP, Columbia, CS 8192, 1965. The exceptionality of Brubeck's rhythmical experimentalism is noted on the accompanying sleeve notes, which suggest that one 'might play through 10,000 jazz records before he found one that wasn't in 4/4 time'. Until the innovations of the math rock bands, it is worth adding, the same could be said of the punk scene.

*Diazepam*¹²¹

The band begins as one, with a five note pattern. From the bass, a low B leads up to the one an octave above it via the fourth, fifth and (flattened) seventh degrees of the scale (E-natural, F-sharp and A-natural). The firm impression is thus created that B is our tonic note, since the bass's opening motif has established this as the top and bottom of its range. Nothing the bass player offers, until the E-orientated coda in the closing bars, will undermine this impression.

The guitar begins, with a jazz-style tonal quirkiness which will remain throughout the song, on the flattened fifth above B (F-natural). From there, the guitar line moves down through the fourth and minor third degrees of a B scale before offering an A-natural to B movement, in unison with the bassist (see example 7). The drummer, meanwhile, simply confirms the thrust with a kick-and-splash combination also performed in rhythmic unison with the straightforward syncopated pattern of the bass and guitars.



Having established what feels like harmonic ground rules with these five notes, the guitar and bass players then weave around each other with the guitarist offering crotchet triplets as he explores the range of B minor pentatonic (again, see the latter

¹²¹ Karate, 'Diazepam', *The Bed is in the Ocean*, Southern Records, 18554, 1998.

two bars of example 7 for the details). As the guitarist goes on to repeat the opening five note motif, the bass player moves smoothly away from the rising pattern with which he had offered counterpoint to the guitar motif's first appearance. Instead, the bassist locks in to a groove with the drummer which he will maintain through most of the remainder of the song.

The rhythm section thus leaves the guitarist free to display his impressive bag of harmonic tricks. Demonstrating both subtlety and dexterity in his use of the flattened-fifth, the flattened-seventh and (as a passing note which would offend neither Bach nor Charlie 'Bird' Parker) the major-seventh from the B minor scale, the guitarist's playing is not only exceptional for the punk field; it is difficult to imagine any of rock's most lauded players – Jimmy Page, say, or Eric Clapton – devising the tonal intricacies of this piece, with its subtle emphases upon ninths, sevenths and sixths.¹²² Admittedly Hendrix's playing strayed from the blues clichés of the minor pentatonic scale and emphasised some unusual intervals beyond those parameters, reflecting his widely commented upon interest in jazz's harmonic systems. The guitar player on 'Diazepam', however, shows a systematic restraint in the nuance of his playing which is a very short distance from the jazz-rock of Weather Report and such like; the guitarist would appear to be primarily from the jazz school, in other words, not the blues or rock schools.

¹²² This is not to say that Page or Clapton would struggle to perform this guitar part; rather that they would be unlikely to conceive it in the first place, judging by the guitar work for which these two, in particular, are famous.

Such a statement gives only half the picture, however. For having demonstrated a skill for harmonically subtle melody far beyond the abilities of most guitar players in any genre of music, the guitar player settles down to a B power chord which he strums casually with down-strokes in quavers for the bulk of the verse. Possibly this is as a consequence of his dual role as vocalist and guitarist in the band: the intricate melodic lines of the intro would be even trickier to perform whilst singing simultaneously. However, elsewhere in the song (and in many other examples from the band's other recordings) it is clear that the player in question can multi-task singing in conjunction with distinctly challenging guitar work.

If it is doubtful, then, that the basic playing in certain sections of the song (eg. the B power chord strummed so simply on each verse) is a result of technical limitation, why, we should wonder, has such a simple part been included in the piece? Presumably, for reasons of 'taste'; yet this throws up further questions. What kind of music might we guess to be to the taste of the players in question? As stated, jazz to some extent at least. Yet the 'rockin'' moments of the track, where it sounds as if a distortion pedal sounds has been used and the guitarist is clearly utilising the *power* of tonic, fifth and octave notes (aka 'the power chord'), make it clear that there are dual impulses here. This taste for the simple comes through most strongly in the coda section, where the tonal centre moves to E, with the bass-player modulating his riff accordingly. The playing, on this section, recalls a single from twenty one years earlier: 'Pretty Vacant', the Sex Pistols' third single which, after a brief guitar intro, hammers away on a power chord with a drumming performance that, to my ears, is almost interchangeable with the performance here. Yet in the 1998 math rock piece under discussion, the nod towards a classic punk sound is followed by some light,

jazzy chords leading functionally back to the tonic note of the piece (B). In its harmonic form and structure, in other words, the song's conclusion is as tidy as the rest of the piece.

To describe Karate – the group which performed 'Diazepam' on their album *The Bed is in the Ocean* – as 'math rock' would not be commonplace in the punk underground. For one thing, the complexity of their music is primarily in the *harmonic* element whereas most groups described as math rock are so called by dint of *rhythmical* complexity of the type found in Shellac's 'Boche's Dick' (which, the careful reader/listener will recall, is based around a simple pentatonic minor harmonic scheme with open fifths offering the only significant element of harmonic counterpoint). There are good reasons for delimiting Karate as part of the punk underground, however. For one thing, *The Bed is in the Ocean* was released on Southern Records and mastered by Southern's Jon Loder, making an immediate connection between Karate, on the one hand, and Crass, Fugazi, Shellac and other crucial punk associates of Loder/Southern, on the other hand. For another thing, the album's packaging is casual in the extreme: the sleeve is, frankly, boring and could hardly be further from the kind of lavish designs one might expect from a major label. Furthermore, there is no barcode on the record and even the catalogue number is difficult to locate. Lyrics are presented as one long block of text, as Fugazi had done on several of their albums, with no song titles to help the reader figure out which words to associate with which song; and so on. Also relevant, as an indicator of Karate's punk orientation, are their lyrical concerns such as, in 'Diazepam', debt ('the red phone bill...'), 'you'd best remember what your landlord said...'), insecure employment conditions ('you're, in you're out...'), social stasis ('just stay right where

you are...'), death, anti-depressants, even just the casually-uttered swear word ('this is a fucking warning').

Geoff Farina, guitarist and vocalist of Karate, had in fact been a zine writer in the early 1990s – the classic occupation of a US 'punk kid'. His zine, *No Duh*, appears to have very much grown from involvement in the punk scene:

I was living in DC and [notorious local underground punk-orientated record label] Simple Machines was just starting up [around 1990], and there were a lot of people around me doing really cool things. And a lot of the people that started helping me to do the zine went on to do really pretty amazing things.¹²³

It is probably also relevant that his sister, Amy Farina, was a member of DC punk-orientated band the Warmers. She also performed with riot grrrl affiliate Lois Maffeo for a period and, more recently, with Ian MacKaye of Fugazi as a duo under the name the Evens. On tour in the UK in the latter context, Amy told me informally in 2006 that, since Karate had split earlier in the decade, her brother Geoff had taken to performing on a weekly basis with a conventional 'modern' jazz ensemble. Whilst I did not think to probe, at that time, as to whether her brother had always been keen on jazz, it seems likely from the example of 'Diazepam' alone that indeed he must have studied jazz guitar in some formal context to have performed on guitar in such a fashion.

¹²³ Quoted in Farseth, *Wipe*, p.210.

Over the course of two decades, then, it seems that punk transformed itself from a music predicated on brutal simplicity and the lack of a need for musical training and became instead a music involving intense musical complexity performed by players with a rare instrumental ability. By the end of the twentieth century, in the punk-orientated case of math rock, there was little sign of the punk idea that anyone can do it. Rather, perhaps the bands often collected under the name math rock were an aberration from the true punk underground, as *Maximum Rock'n'Roll's* Tim Yohannon was arguing at the time Karate recorded 'Diazepam'. The question hinges upon the question of what punk *is*, probably: if punk is a style of music, as *MR'n'R* seems to have believed, math rock was certainly an aberration from that style; if, however, punk's most significant detail was/is its operational tendency rather than its music, perhaps math rock was just right as punk music for the 1990s cultural/social/political moment which produced it.

Section Summary

In the 1990s, math rock supplemented the existing traditions of punk with a hitherto repressed level of musical dexterity and complexity. This repression would seem to have been previously upheld by punks since the 1970s as an attempt to negate the perceived excesses of prog rock. Math rock brought a return of the repressed elements by using compound time signatures, extended melodic phrases with implications of complex harmonies and other relatively advanced musical techniques. In fact, these repressed musical elements had already made slight returns during the 1980s and late 1970s punk traditions. However, until the math rock scene developed in the 1990s, complex and advanced musicianship had never been widely accepted nor encouraged

in punk. This raises the question as to why such musicality became more prominent during that decade. On the face of it, it seems fair to presume that the rise of ‘punk in the mainstream’ post-*Nevermind* was the principal causative factor for the change. It may be, however, that both the rise of Nirvana *and* of math rock were contingent upon wider geo-political factors discussed above. Whatever caused math rock to arrive in the 1990s, the case studies I have offered here would certainly seem to indicate that the music was certainly complex (and thereby transgressive of punk’s previous tendency) but, nevertheless, was consistent with earlier traditions of punk in identifiable ways.

iv. Conclusion

‘What is punk?’, for punks, is the question that won’t go away. In 1991, the mainstream arrival of something calling itself ‘punk’ placed this question at the heart of the punk underground. In the UK, by the 1990s, punk was supposed to be ancient history in any case. In the US, however, for more than ten years prior to the release of *Nevermind*, punk had a certain socio-cultural luxury: beyond its own, tiny microcosmos, very few knew the scene existed. Because of this, punk identity seemed largely unproblematic since punks were ‘us’ whilst the ‘them’ against which the underground identified itself were unmistakably *other* to a punk scene rich in micromatic solidarity.

After 1991, this situation changed drastically. The riot grrrl and math rock scenes can both be interpreted as differing responses to this change. Such is most clearly the case with the riot grrrl scene, principal agents within which were intimate with the single most significant deliverers of punk in the mainstream, Nirvana. Riot grrrl may have been a response to the same factors which stimulated the rise of Nirvana, perhaps, but their product was produced and received in a very different political, cultural and social manner as compared with *Nevermind*. The riot grrrls, to be more specific, suggested that anyone can do it and thereby took the punk underground back to what was/is perhaps its most central principle.

Within its own micromatic cell, the riot grrrl scene’s attempt to show that anyone can do it was largely successful, in the sense that environments were created wherein musical productions were taken to be valuable by others who felt themselves to be

present in a (new-sense) moment. In the more macro-social rock/pop scene, that said, the music was evaluated as an indicator that some people – young women with little musical experience, essentially – couldn't and shouldn't do it. The 'anyone' whom the riot grrrl scene was able to engage, therefore, was evidently a micro-social 'anyone' which would seem to have been constitutively incapable of engaging the kind of universal anyone (everyone, that is) at the heart of certain theories discussed in chapter two above.

In the math rock scene, meanwhile, a distinct form of recoil away from mainstream punk occurred. This was constituted by maintenance of certain punk operational tendencies – releasing music through independent labels, avoiding barcodes, ostensibly 'uncommercial' record sleeves, and such like – alongside musical content which became less and less readily identifiable as punk. This musical content harked back to the 'prog' era which, supposedly, 1970s punk had swept aside when it insisted that 'anyone can do it'. It seems to be the case that prog rock had often threatened to return after first wave punk's ostensible dismissal. It is possible, therefore, that math rock was able to usher in such a return which, hitherto, punk had successfully resisted precisely because the historical, cultural and social conditions were appropriate in the 1990s for such a return to take place.

These conditions were such that, by the 1990s, many were arguing that some form of 'end of history' had rendered liberal democracy entirely unopposed, in permanent ascent towards an all-encompassing dominance. Math rock can be interpreted, in the light of this, as some form of paradoxical articulation of the inarticulable: by blurring the sense of communication, it may have been an unconscious attempt to present a

subjectivity unsubjectified, a space beyond universality, a liberal space beyond the confines of liberal democracy. Math rock, to refer back to the politico-philosophical ruminations of chapter two above, is somewhat Stirnerian in its ultra-anarchistic attempt to break out of social bonds, in a musico-cultural sense at least. The math rock music discussed above, particularly the Shellac piece, renders facile identification with the music impossible.

Both the riot grrrl and math rock traditions turned away from the mainstream appearance of punk to an outside, then; an outside ('the underground') which, partly as a consequence of their anarchistic philosophy, punks have repeatedly felt a need to claim themselves always 'within'.¹²⁴ If punk always has to be outside, then, if punks are a minority which determinedly *cannot be the majority*, how can it possibly be the case that 'anyone can do it'? Some, only a minority sum, can do 'it', the punk underground would appear to be insisting. Still, then, the question burns: *could* the idea that anyone can do it live up to its own promise of universality? In conclusion, I shall make one further attempt to explore whether, perhaps, this could be the case.

¹²⁴ Attempting to be within this outside is also, of course, a contradiction of the pure anarchist ideal, for which reason the punk underground is best figured as being anarcho-socialist or some such compound since its elements of solidarity ('up the punx!' and other such maxims, for example) render the scene other than purely anarchist.

Conclusion

Every wave [of punk has] its own time... Every time a hurricane hits town, it's brand new, y'know? When it hits you personally, you think it's the first big storm to hit the city, and it ain't; it just feels that way. And there might be another one tomorrow! So it was with music; I was very aware of what was happening that moment, not concerned with what had been before or what might come after.¹

The punk underground has had a series of micro-traditions, each of which has been felt to empower participants with a (new-)sense that their moment is 'the first big storm to hit the city'. Every wave of punk, in the quotation above, seems to appear as a 'time out of joint', we might say after Derrida, in which the 'moment' is more important than the diachrony of 'what had been before or what might come after'. Nevertheless, if the above quotation and the bulk of my research here is to be believed, punk is always a re-birth rather than a pure origin, in fact: whether ostentatious originality is desired (as in punk) or resisted (as many in the folk movement seem to have desired), the trace always already involves supplementarity, to put this in Derridean terms; nothing comes from a vacuum, in other words, whilst a continuation of a tradition is always also a beginning.

Discourses around punk and post-punk musics have often shown surprisingly little acknowledgement of this necessity, however, tending rather to idealise the idea of 'New punks [who have] constantly re-invigorated the scene, creating new rules, new

¹ Jeff Antcliff, vocalist of early 1980s anarcho-punk group D & V, quoted in Glasper, *The Day*, p.411.

fashions, and new signifiers of identity'.² As we have seen in chapters three and four, successive micro-traditions within the punk underground over the course of a quarter century have certainly brought novel elements to the overall tradition, and this newness seems to have been felt to be crucial to participants. Note, for example, that the epigrammatic quotations of three of the four case studies herein focus on newness: anarcho-punk as a 're-birth' of punk, cutie as 'a new fruition' and riot grrrl as the scene which (once again) 're-invented punk'.³ Even the exception to this – math rock, the least obviously 'punk'-sounding amongst these case studies, primarily by dint of its similarities to the heretofore barred pre-punk 'prog' music – brought forward identifiable elements from a pre-existing punk trace.

The punk underground's micro-traditions have always brought continuation as well as new beginnings, then. What rarely seems to be discussed or considered, in punk or elsewhere indeed, is the question raised at the outset of this study as to whether this

² Cogan, Brian, *Encyclopedia of Punk Music and Punk Culture* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 2006), p.xxvii. It is perhaps worth re-stating that, from the point of view of the present research, *all* punk music is post-punk in the sense that no point of pure origin can be found; certainly not in the case of the nominator 'punk', as shown at the outset of chapter three above.

³ Admittedly the epigram to the cutie section does not mention the scene as a 'new fruition' of *punk* specifically. Given that the newness of which the writer speaks is explicitly presented as a fruitful combination of post-punk (Edwyn Collins) and pre-punk (the Byrds) and that, as I have shown, many within the scene perceived punk rock as the central paradigm within which cutie should be referenced, it is fair to suggest that cutie was here being promoted as, broadly speaking, a new fruition of punk/post-punk music nevertheless. Certainly the writer of the comments I have used epigrammatically (Simon Reynolds) perceived the cutie scene as a distinct development in the long 1980s aftermath of first wave punk, quite separate from what he calls 'post punk' (which I have labelled as FWPP for reasons given in chapter three above) but still implicitly within punk's shadow.

new-sense of ostentatious supplementarity seriously empowers the punks or whether, alternatively, fidelity to tradition could perhaps create a greater power.

An exception to the notable silence on this question would be the anarcho-punk band Conflict, whose 'Increase the Pressure' was discussed in chapter two. In this song, it is fair to say that Conflict insist that empowerment through any new-sense is felt to be unnecessary: rather, we must simply increase the pressure on the status quo by using 'yet another battering ram against a wall of power'. In terms of empowerment, however, we can note that Crass – whose music and message were more challenging and ambiguous, more ostentatiously new and deliberately less traditional – sold many more records than Conflict, generated greater rumblings in the corridors of power and are, in the twenty-first century, the subject of significant cultural interest in newspapers, scholarly journals and, of course, the fanzines of the punk underground for whom they remain a canonical band. Conflict, by contrast, are largely forgotten beyond an ever dwindling *milieu* of die-hard punks.

Crass wanted to shake up the Left as well as the Right (much as Bob Dylan seems to have wanted to do in the mid-1960s). Conflict, by contrast, simply wanted the Left to keep up the pressure on 'the system'; hopefully, indeed, to increase this pressure, but not by offering some radical new perspective or an experimental new music: rather just by keeping the tradition steady and hoping that their battering ram would eventually break through. The band which was offering something which felt new, then, turned out to have a greater and a more long-held appeal, especially with the young. This is where the idea that punk is somehow a folk music would seem to fall down: punk seems to valorise the new whereas folk is intrinsically conservative (with

a small ‘c’) with regard to tradition.⁴ The new-sense in punk, overall, does seem to offer an engagement which feels like a political empowerment, as has been noted by George McKay and Stephen Duncombe. The latter, however, has queried whether the riot grrrl scene, in particular, could ever translate ‘cultural action’ into ‘political change’. At the heart of his query is a concern about the validity of cultural politics when they fail to engage with the ‘common culture’. Duncombe, then, in line with his generally Marxist tendency, is concerned that the micro-politics of the punk underground cannot offer substantial empowerment precisely because they fail to engage with the macro-social culture.

McKay, on the other hand, in line with his generally anarchist tendency, has praised ‘the cultural milieu of punk’ for its ability to ‘keep possibilities open’: a ‘more local and achievable’ ambition than the ‘global transformation and the construction of a new human subjectivity’ (there can be little doubt that, with these last words, McKay is deliberately invoking the Marxist ideal of proletariat as universal subject). What are these ‘possibilities’, we should want to know? They are, I would argue, the possibilities of a different politics, a different culture, a different society. Traditions of punk have empowered individuals to feel a new politics, culture and society are possible, at least at a ‘local’ level. The question, for Duncombe, however, is whether this feeling – this new-sense feeling, as I have called it – can become at all substantial.

⁴ The word ‘valorise’ is not intended here to invoke Marx’s conception of *Verwertung* (as in the *Kapitalverwertung* of which he theorises at length). Clearly, that said, I would encourage the reader to recognise that there is a certain tension between Marxism and punk’s desire for empowerment through new-ness.

Since this question clearly hinges on debates which go back to those between Marxists and anarchists in the nineteenth century, as discussed in chapter two, it is worth considering a rare example of commentary from Marx and Engels on the general topic of cultural and artistic production and its relation to social relations:

In regard to [the ‘organisers of labour’: Fourier and his followers], it was not their view, as Sancho [Max Stirner] imagines, that each should do the work of Raphael, but [rather] that *anyone in whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance...* The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour.⁵

In whom, we might therefore want to ask, does this potential reside? It seems quite possible that, here, Marx and Engels are proposing this ‘anyone’ as, at least potentially, a universal constituency. Would the unhindered development of this potentiality be a constitutive element within a communist society, then? Since they counterpoise it so clearly against the (constitutively capitalist) ‘division of labour’, it seems likely that such is the case. That given, perhaps the possibility glimpsed through punk’s new-sense is precisely a communistic possibility. Doubtless the absence of class analysis, as complained of by both Duncombe and McKay, would stall any hypothetical approval Marx might have offered to the punk underground. Bearing in mind the sublimation, post-Marx, of connections between socialism and anarchism, however, it is worth wondering whether punk perhaps has presented a

⁵ Marx and Engels, *German*, pp.108-9.

spectre of the very possibility which haunted Marx (or, perhaps we can equally say, with which Marx has haunted us today)?

It is on questions of *possibility*, of course, that Derrida's various ethico-political ruminations have largely focussed. The possibility about which the late Derrida theorised at length (a possibility which I have argued Derrida hints at *as* possibility though, as we have seen, he also states it as – conditional to its own possibility – an impossibility) is of justice. His text *Spectres of Marx*, according to the author himself, is precisely 'inspired by an idea of justice irreducible to all the failures of communism'.⁶ As noted in chapter two, several commentators have suggested that an anarchistic tendency resides within Derrida's texts. As I have pointed out, however, one can read Derrida as arguing not against Marx but, rather, that the spectre which haunted Marx in 1848 continues to haunt us still.

By raising this possibility – the possibility of a justice after Marx despite the 'failures' of Marxist communism – Derrida somewhat re-connects anarchist and socialist tendencies. Certainly, at least, the Derridean (impossible) possibility of justice requires an aporia which, despite its constitutive undecidability *as* aporia, demands a decision. His hint is that justice could arrive if 'time out of joint' could arrive. This being impossible, justice is constitutively 'to come' (*à venir*). Derrida is socially anarchistic, nevertheless, when – despite justice being contingent upon aporia rather than upon actual decision – he implies justice as a(n) (impossible) possibility which is to come when the ethical relation moves beyond dissymmetry. For Derrida, such an

⁶ Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What*, p.81.

ethical movement towards symmetry – like justice itself – is ‘impossible’ yet there is room to ponder just how impossible he wants us to think this impossibility is.

Perhaps, it might be supposed, for Derrida justice is just impossible and that is that. If this is his absolute position, however, we might wonder, on the one hand, why he talked of it at such length for so many years and, on the other hand, why he claimed himself to be in such broad agreement with Levinas for whom, according to Simon Critchley, ‘justice is “an incessant correction of the asymmetry of proximity”’.

Perhaps, then, we would do better to remember (again) that Derrida insisted that ‘the impossible must be done’. In any case, *if* the justice of which Derrida spoke should come, it would be anarchistic in the sense that it would demand a *decision* beyond law. This decision, being distinct from law, cannot be universal and, therefore, must be distinct from the Marxist sense of communist justice which, unequivocally, Marx theorised as being universal (a law, essentially, then) in its transformation of material relations. Rather, Derrida decried the force of law and aligned himself with a Levinasian ethics in which the demand of a proximal other generates a possibility of justice wherein the asymmetry between self and other never allows the latter to dissolve into the former (even if, for Levinas at least, justice allows an ‘incessant correction’ of this asymmetry). This un-dissolved self is faced with something of an ethico-social aporia quite different from a choice between class consciousness and the bourgeois individualist’s apparitional chance for decision; this self is anarchistic, therefore, though the ethical aspect puts it closer to social anarchism *à la* Kropotkin or Proudhon rather than the ‘pure’ egoist-anarchism of Stirner.

To return to George McKay's justification of punk's politics of empowerment, his claim is that punk 'keeps *possibilities* open': does punk, thereby, make possible this impossible thing called justice? Perhaps; a crucial word, from a Derridean point of view, for from that perspective justice has to remain undecidable in order for this impossible thing to become possible. Perhaps, though, Stephen Duncombe is correct, by contrast, when he argues that punk's culturally-limited empowerment cannot effectively bring political justice since, being constitutively disengaged from the majority culture, it disempowers itself just as empowerment is glimpsed.

When I set out on the current research project, my sympathies were similar to McKay's. Consider, for example, the movement of *indie* from being denotative of punk-orientated independence (as it was in the era of the cutie scene) to being connotative and, eventually, effectively denotative of a rather bland, retrogressive style of music (as it was by the mid-1990s). It feels fair, with this in mind, to say that it is 'majority culture' (to use Duncombe's term) which actually disempowers any possibility of justice; a possibility of justice which punk, perhaps, might be capable of bringing forth *when it stays underground*. Having said that, the politics of the math rock scene would seem to very much support Duncombe's complaint that the punk underground is impotent in the face of what he calls 'Politics with a big P'. And did Crass or the key riot grrrl-orientated groups really bring justice when, in fact, they disappeared from practical activity?

It would be fruitless to pretend that the case studies I have offered vindicate the politics of empowerment in the traditions of punk in any consistent way, then. Rather, they highlight contradictory trajectories in which the empowerment brought forth

tends to disappear, on account of, variously: a commitment to rejecting leadership in the case of anarcho-punk; an unrealistic faith in the possibility of an indie underground going overground in the case of the cutie scene; an inability or, perhaps, an unwillingness to engage with 'majority culture' in the case of the riot grrrls; and a fundamental commitment to social disengagement in the case of math rock, the musical complexity of which very much undermined the idea that 'anyone can do it' and thus offered disempowerment to many within the punk scene who lacked the requisite musical dexterity. Duncombe's disappointment with the punk underground is both understandable and validly presented. To complain of punk's anarchistic tendency, that said, is to undermine the very thing which Duncombe (like McKay and myself) finds exciting about the punk underground: its mode of empowerment, that is, in which a new-sense encourages recognition of certain political possibilities and realities.

Duncombe's complaint, furthermore, also disregards the historico-cultural situation of punk which I sketched in chapter one: in short, there are strong grounds for 'reading' punk as a continuation of a post-Marxist tendency which was already coming into play in the mid-sixties work of Bob Dylan. In this reading, Dylan's turn away from socialistic 'protest' folksong sounded something of a death knell for Marxist-orientated folk music; punk's movement towards an anarchistic-orientation may have given the Left a sense of new possibilities opening, but to see in punk some possibility for a return of the heroic, all-out-revolutionary demand for universal social transformation is to ignore where and when it has come to fruition, I would argue, as well as disregarding its general rhetoric which has consistently been in favour of anarchism. Punk, I contend, has been thoroughly post-Marxist; at least in the

underground, where disengagement with majority culture has been the *sine qua non*. In this way, it has differed strongly from the post-war folk scene which, at least within its Left wing fringe, seems to have wanted to spread a Marxist/socialist strategy as widely as possible within society.

It is in the hope of conjuring something of punk's paradoxical mode of empowerment that I have coined the term *micromatic*. In the underground, punks have sought to make real the ideal of no leaders/heroes/stars/etc., hence Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill's complaint that 'I didn't appreciate being made into a leader when I didn't feel like I was... I never said that. Not once did I say, "I'm the leader". Other people wrote that against my wishes...' ⁷ This 'no leaders' ideal has also been attempted when the likes of Crass have released music by obscure bands on its label, thus sharing the bigger bands growing fame; or when the likes of Fugazi have declined interviews with significant periodicals and have remained responsible for their own business affairs despite extraordinary sales growth; or even just when bands have simply chosen the less-appealing bottom-of-the-bill slot at a gig despite being the main 'draw' of the night. The paradox is that, in the cases of Crass, Bikini Kill and Fugazi certainly but also countless other underground punk bands, the anti-hero band becomes perceived to be heroic precisely on account of its anti-hero gesture.

Is this just? Perhaps not, we should quickly say, but nevertheless quickly add that something interesting – from a Derridean perspective at least – is happening here between the gesturer and the other who feels that they recognise the rationale behind

⁷ Quoted in Schilt, Kristin, "'Riot Grrrl Is...': Contestation Over Meaning in a Music Scene' in Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, pp.115-130, p.126.

the gesture: in this other, a feeling perhaps arrives that – what? Perhaps, that ‘I myself’ could recoil from my own powerfulness and give away that power which, in a sense, was never really ‘mine’. This would be the micromatic gesture: a self recognising a demand from the other or, in a sense, a self recognising that ‘I’ am other for an other self and therefore gesturing at ‘exposing ourselves to what we cannot appropriate’ (Derrida, as quoted in chapter two). If some punk thinks it just that, say, Crass give out free food or give away money to whichever cause, they are likely ‘inspired’ by the gesture (bands such as Crass are very frequently claimed to be ‘inspirational’). If, however, this hypothetical punk tries to do just what Crass did, they of course are following a *lead*. No leaders? No-one can say this, it seems, and Crass – the classic example of an anarchistic, micromatic punk band – would seem to have proved the point by dissolving their identity *as* Crass just as their power appeared to be at its peak.

Consequent to this insistence upon leaderless, micromatic tendencies, the punk underground repeatedly brings forth new-sense (sub-)subcultures within its trace. The underground subcultures I have focused upon here – anarcho-punk, cutie, riot grrrl and math rock – are just four of the available post-punk continuations from the 1980s and 1990s I could have examined. In the twenty-first century, meanwhile, there have certainly been further subcultural developments in and around the punk underground: the *anti-folk* scene of acoustic guitar-playing songwriters such as Jeffrey Lewis (who, it is worth noting, has recently issued a full album of Crass covers performed in a ‘folky’ style); the *electro-clash* groups which have re-introduced synthesisers to post-punk rock, almost certainly inspired by the FWPP groups written of by Simon Reynolds; the *twee-pop* revival which has resuscitated many of the forgotten groups

from the cutie era; the *screamo* scene which has effectively supplemented the *emo* tradition; race-rights orientated sub-groupings such as *Afro-punk* and *Latino-hardcore*; the *Queercore* scene which has brought a punk challenge to the mainstream of gay and lesbian culture. Due to limitations of time and space, these other micro-scenes have been excluded, as has the interesting subject of how the internet now influences the punk underground.⁸ Nevertheless, the reader can rest assured that there remains a great number of strands within the punk underground, with evident new-sense differences between even just the four I have discussed herein.

From a Marxist perspective, a critical question remains, however: why the constant need for this new-sense? Why not have one punk underground, with one style, aiming to create a punk world with, say, studded leather jackets handed out like free school meals? The idea sounds risible one might think yet, surprisingly enough, is not so very far from a recent suggestion by Ted and Terry of (ostensibly anarchist) US underground punk band This Bike Is A Pipebomb:

Terry: That's how amazing the DIY community is. If you ask me does it have any limitations: Absolutely not! ... What if all the punks did just move to one city and we actually started THE punk community?

Ted: Take over the whole city, fuck up all the roads, ride our bikes everywhere.

⁸ For useful insight into this issue, see Wendel, Evan Landon, *New Potentials for "Independent" Music: Social Networks, Old and New, and the Ongoing Struggles to Reshape the Music Industry*, MA thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008. For my critique of Wendel's position, see Dale, Pete, 'It Was Easy, It Was Cheap, So What?: Reconsidering the DIY Principle of Punk and Indie Music', *Popular Music* 3/2 (2008), pp. 171-193.

Terry: Just make this DIY town where we run everything and everything is run in this DIY way. It's this perfect community where everything is done by trade and all of the export is just traded for whatever imports we need. I think it's amazing, the power of the DIY community... For me, I just think the DIY community is limitless.⁹

The Marxist objection, of course, should be that capital and money are not synonymous and, therefore, when 'everything is done by trade' capitalist exploitation will remain in place by dint of the surplus value invested in the commodity ('our bikes', for example, which still have to be produced by labour).¹⁰ A further intriguing question is as to whether immigrants to this 'perfect city' would be required to pledge allegiance to 'THE punk community'. Possibly not, since *This Bike Is Not A Pipe Bomb* do suggest that 'Maybe we should eventually stop using the word punk!', implying that principles (trade and barter rather than cash, principally, it seems) are more important than musical style.¹¹ If, however, this imagined city did consist of 'all the punks' and, for the sake of argument, none of its denizens desired any other form

⁹ Quoted in *Last Hours* #13, London, UK, 2006, p.80.

¹⁰ It was precisely in objection to such local solutions to capitalist exploitation of labour that Marx objected to the 'collectivist' ideas of Proudhon, insisting that any system of labour credits would in fact simply maintain the basic inequity of labour exploitation. See, for example, Marx's many complaints about Proudhonist 'doctrinaire experiments [such as] exchange banks' in the 1848 French uprising, as described in 'The Eighteenth', *Surveys*, p.154).

¹¹ *Last Hours* fanzine, pp.79-80.

of music (presuming, for now, that punk *is* a form of music, of course¹²), would there remain any requirement for variation, for innovation, for a new-sense?

Perhaps not. Yet is difficult to see why there would be a need for angry music in utopia; and for this reason if no other, it is difficult to see how ‘the’ punk city could actually exist. Certainly, if resistance to the musical hegemony of the perfect punk city should arise, it would be appropriate for the insurgents to develop a new-sense with which to articulate their objection to the orthodoxy. Given that, etymologically, the word punk implies strongly a subaltern position, the idea of a punk orthodoxy is probably oxymoronic in any case.

Despite the above-quoted comments from *This Bike Is A Pipe Bomb*, then, a desire for universal allegiance to punk can hardly make sense. Anyone can do it? Maybe so, but that doesn’t necessarily mean everyone should. The point, surely, is rather that everyone should have the *option* to make music, that anyone’s music-making should be *valued*. It is the *moment*, just that brief (and strictly immeasurable) instance, in which a performance is evaluated by its respondents, that gives music its unique power to create a micromantic window in which justice might perhaps be felt, however fleetingly: ‘Forget melodies or virtuosity... It’s important, but *anyone can do that*. That’s just research. If you can’t react to the situation you find yourself in... then you

¹² The claim that punk is ‘More Than Music’ has often been made, with this particular slogan providing the name for a US annual festival in the 1990s (it is worth noting, that said, that many complaints were heard when the festival began to reflect its own name by reducing the amount of hardcore punk and increasing the number of other forms of music in the late 1990s, suggesting perhaps that the festival would have been better-named ‘No More Than Music’).

probably shouldn't be on a stage at all. It's the thin line that separates the mediocre from the great...' ¹³

'Reacting to the situation you find yourself in', here, appears to be the fundamental variable behind whether some anyone can *really* do 'it': valid art ('the great') is a response to the *moment*, a pointer of leadership in a sense *but one which must have the possibility of rejection and of negative response within its instance*. For Everett True, the above-quoted journalist whose interest in punk is sharp and long-held, great art would be Beat Happening, the Pastels, Bikini Kill and similar bands from the underground. For some other anyone, these bands might hold little or no appeal. The point, however, is not to search for a music to unite the world. Rather, according to the core value of the punk underground, we can look for our own responses in our local environments and value seriously the expression which DIY culture allows. It is for this reason that the new-sense is important: it encourages just that aleatoric response which *could* result in rejection but *might* find sympathy in some synchronic instance; it demands a particular response, just now, in other words.

The end result of punk's micromatic gesture, strictly speaking, would probably be that *punk is most punk when it ceases to call itself punk*, and thereby ceases to concern itself with looking or sounding 'punk'. After all, if punk is always about the outsider (the surplus, the remainder beyond the mainstream), how can it be named? *Whatever*

¹³ True, *Nirvana*, pp.xiii-xiv, emphasis added.

people say I am, that's what I'm not is perhaps as close as one can get to a formula for punk; it is also, unarguably, also a formula for a radical de-nomination.¹⁴

It is interesting, in this regard, that six of the eight musical examples offered in chapters three and four were found to have particular harmonic peculiarities (the exceptions being Shellac, which was found to be most intriguing in respect of its rhythm, and the Pastels, whose music is nevertheless radical in a certain sense by dint of its childlike simplicity). Why this consistent searching for 'weird' harmonic relationships such as the modal \flat VII chord noted in several of the pieces, or the unresolved dissonances also uncovered?¹⁵ It seems likely that it is just this kind of musical peculiarity which punk bands and fans search for in order to locate a new-sense. These agents often argue such peculiarity to be lacking from mainstream rock and pop. Punk music, in short, is supposed to challenge the status quo; and this is felt

¹⁴ The phrase 'whatever people say I am, that's what I'm not' has provided twenty-first century pop stars Arctic Monkeys with the title of their debut album but actually derives from Karel Reisz's 1960 kitchen sink drama *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (itself based on an earlier work, Alan Sillitoe's novel of the same name). The formula necessarily requires de-nomination simply because it would insist that any nominal identity is the opposite of the truth of what this 'I' is.

¹⁵ As noted above, the \flat VII chord does of course appear prominently elsewhere in rock and pop. Nevertheless, I would argue that the often ungainly (from a conservatory point of view, at least) utilisation of the \flat VII chord in the songs discussed here reflects a certain deliberate musical awkwardness desired by the punk and post-punk bands under discussion. Deliberately using an awkward 'wrong' chord, I contend, makes the bands in question feel that their song is somehow more 'expressive' than, for example, a straightforward three chord trick sequence would be; and this is one example of punk's general desire for self-presentation through ostentatious unfamiliarity which my research overall has focussed upon.

to happen when dissonance (and arrhythmia, and performative clumsiness, and other such effects) are featured in song.

Punk's political desires, its politics of empowerment, then, can be argued to be readable 'in' the music, hence my musicological analyses herein. The anarchistic, micromatic desire, we can summarise, is that anyone can do something which demands an immediate recognition that this anyone is *someone* (not just anyone, then). This paradoxical aspect of punk's politics of identity has been discussed before (Duncombe's observations are particularly astute in this regard, neatly outlining the way that an identity – being 'someone' – which is based on negation from the mainstream means that this mainstream – the 'anyone' in my formula – to a large extent defines and thus somewhat controls, in effect, the 'identity' of the punk). My particular intention, here, has been to ask further whether doing something markedly *new* is a necessary element of this politics of empowerment. It is hard to conclude that such is necessary, given that – as Derrida's theory of originary repetition would suggest – each and every re-mark's iterability renders each and every mark 'new' in an absolute and overall way. That given, we surely ought to always already be willing and able to recognise that, essentially, anyone (everyone) is someone.

Capitalism, however, alienates; and in our alienation-riven society, it is very easy to forget that the other is someone, someone particular, never really a personification of the Other about whom Levinas sometimes theorises. Certainly it would be nice if a less-than-markedly-novel performance could be widely recognised as characteristic despite its familiarity, and this perhaps is the greatest reason why punk is so often claimed (wished, it might be better to say) to have something strongly in common

with folk music. That's not how punk empowers, however, or so the case studies herein would seem to suggest.

Punk, then, is probably quite reasonably labelled as a spontaneous response to capitalism. This element of spontaneity would best not be too quickly brushed with a Marxist complaint that it is therefore mere bourgeois individualism: after all, punk and other essentially spontaneous cultures have maintained a certain presence in popular cultures over a quarter of a century or so in which the Marxist analysis has been increasingly marginal, has been decreasingly popular. What punk generates, if McKay is correct, is a possibility. This possibility, in short, is that there can be something other than a capitalist subject, that there can be an individual not subjectified by capital but, rather, empowered to present itself to others as an individual.

How, then, could this empowered self avoid disempowering others? Perhaps through a 'recognition of what is stronger than I am': 'someone, something, that happens, that happens to us, and that has no need of us to happen (to us)' (as so described by Derrida, see chapter two). This would be the 'weak messianic power' which I have theorised as a crucial component for what I have described as the micromatic recoil: a power which arises from a certain weakness 'before' the other. Or should that be *after* the other? Rather, perhaps, we should say that Derrida theorised an empowerment (or, in his term, a *justice*) conditional to *time out if joint*: not some synchronic plenitude but an impossible time off its hinges, felt as a moment in which 'something' happens despite the fact that, perhaps, it 'has no need of us'.

Fans of punk and, doubtless, many other kinds of music (perhaps all, but this is not the place to make such a claim) might feel themselves to have experienced such an 'event'. What would be important, if such a thing were possible, would be an arrival in which the self's consciousness of its otherness *for* the other would remain sensitive to this dissymmetry between the self and the wholly other other *yet simultaneously* a weak messianic power (justice?) might come. Could this impossible possibility be spread universally, so that – everywhere – this empowerment with/of/from/to the other would arrive? Saul Newman would appear to think so, as we saw in chapter two, with his theory of a non-Marxist 'real' universality on the basis of *multiple* particularities, particularities whose identities are themselves contingently constructed through the struggle itself'. And though his dismissal of Marx's idea of the proletariat as the universal class is certainly hasty, the idea is nevertheless intriguing: a universal recoil, we might call it, in which the species 'man' recognises the dissymmetry between their self and all the others yet, nevertheless, in a sense *embraces* this 'power' which resides wholly otherwise.

The idea is also rather hard to swallow, that said, although perhaps little less so than Marx's extraordinary promise which, we might recall, also proposed a transformed ontology in a glorious day to come. Such an idea, in any case, would seem to be the only possible consistent justification for punk's idealised empowerment. Such a universal transformation would require the dissolution of the name punk, as noted above, and the radical alteration of a whole lot more in terms of social relations. Whether such a transformation is conceivable or desirable is for the judgement of others, doubtless. Similarly, whether there is any justice in punk's traditional (though

always felt to be 'new') insistence that 'anyone can do it' demands a decision from someone other than anyone who makes the claim.

Bibliography

Books

- Anderson, Mark and Jenkins, Mark, *Dance of days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2001).
- Althusser, Louis, *The Future Lasts a Long Time and the Facts* (London: Vintage, 1994).
- Apollonio, Umbro, *The Documents of Twentieth-Century Art: Futurist Manifestos* (New York: Viking Press, 1970)
- Arnold, Gina, *Route 666: On the Road to Nirvana* (London: Picador, 1993).
- Arnold, Gina, *Kiss This: Punk in the Present Tense* (New York: St. Martin's press, 1997).
- Attali, Jacques, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (London: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
- Azerrad, Michael, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes From the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (London: Little, Brown and company, 2001).
- Badiou, Allain, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005).
- Bannister, Matthew, *White Boys, White Noise: Maculinites and 1980s Indie Guitar Rock* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006).
- Barz, Gregory F. and Cooley, Timothy J., *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
- Barthes, Roland, *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana, 1977).
- Bayton, Mavis, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Beardsworth, Richard, *Derrida and the Political* (London: Routledge, 1996).

- Bennett, Andy, Kahn-Harris, Keith, *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004).
- Bennington, Geoffrey, Derrida, Jacques, *Jacques Derrida: Derridabase/Circumfession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Berger, George, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus, 2006).
- Blake, Mark, *Punk: The Whole Story* (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2008).
- Blush, Steven, *American Hardcore: A Tribal Account* (LA: Feral House, 2001).
- Bohlman, Philip, *The Study of Folk Music in the Modern World* (Indiana: Bloomington, 1988).
- Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996).
- Bowness, Alan, *Modern European Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972).
- Borch-Jacobsen, Mikkel, *Lacan: The Absolute Master* (California: Stanford, 1991).
- Boyes, Georgina, *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).
- Brand, Oscar, *The Ballad Mongers: Rise of the Modern Folk Song* (Fitzhenry & Whiteshade: Toronto, 1962).
- Burke, Sean, *Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).
- Callahan, Mat, *The Trouble With Music* (Edinburgh: AK, 2005).
- Carson, Mina, Lewis, Tisa, Shaw, Susan M., *Girls Rock!: Fifty Years of Women Making Music* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2004).
- Chanan, Michael, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 1995).
- Chomsky, Noam, *Syntactic Structures* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2002).

- Clayton, Martin, Herbert, Trevor, Middleton, Richard, *The Cultural Study of Music* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
- Cogan, Brian, *Encyclopedia of Punk Music and Punk Culture* (Connecticut: Greenwood, 2006).
- Cohen, Sarah, *Rock Culture in Liverpool: Popular Music in the Making* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).
- Critchley, Simon, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought* (London: Verso, 1990).
- Critchley Simon, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).
- Critchley, Simon, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- Cross, Charles C., *Heavier Than Heaven: The Biography of Kurt Cobain* (London: Sceptre, 2001).
- Davidson, Eric, *We Never Learn: The Gunk Punk Undergut, 1998-2001* (Milwaukee: Backbeat, 2010).
- Derrida, Jacques, Ferraris, Maurizio, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001).
- Derrida, Jacques, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1976).
- Derrida, Jacques, *On Touching – Jean Luc Nancy* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005).
- Derrida, Jacques, *Politics of Friendship*, translated by Collins, George (London: Verso, 1997).
- Derrida, Jacques, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, translated by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 2006).

- Derrida, Jacques, Roudinesco, Elisabeth, *For What Tomorrow...: A Dialogue* (California: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- Duncombe, Stephen, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (London: Verso, 1997).
- Dunaway, David King, *How Can I Keep from Singing?: The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Random House, 2008).
- Dylan, Bob, *Chronicles: Volume 1* (Simon & Schuster: London, 2004).
- Eagleton, Terry, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991).
- Farren, Mick, *Give the Anarchist a Cigarette* (London: Johnathon Cape, 2001).
- Farseth, Erik, *Wipe Away My Eyes: Underground Culture and Politics* (Minneapolis: Abandoned House, 2001).
- Finnegan, Ruth, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- Foucault, Michel, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 3* (London: Penguin, 1994).
- Frith, Simon, *Performing Rites: On The Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- Fukuyama, Francis, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London, Penguin, 1992).
- Gasché, Rodolphe, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1986).
- Glasper, Ian, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984* (London: Cherry Red, 2006).
- Goddard, Simon, *The Smiths: The Songs That Saved Your Life* (London: Reynolds and Hearn, 2004).

- Goodman, Fred, *The Mansion On The Hill: Dylan, Young, Geffen, Springsteen and the Head-on Collision of Rock and Commerce* (London: Pimlico, 1997).
- Gorman, Paul, *In Their Own Write: Adventures in the Music Press* (London: MPG, 2001).
- Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).
- Gramsci, Antonio, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).
- Green, Gil, *The New Radicalism: Anarchist or Marxist?* (New York: International, 1971).
- Guthrie, Woody, *Bound For Glory* (London: Picador, 1969).
- Gutting, Gary, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- Harker, Ben, *Class Act: The Cultural and Political Life of Ewan MacColl* (London: Pluto, 2007).
- Harker, Dave, *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British Folk Song, 1700 to the Present Day* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).
- Harker, Dave, *One for the Money: Politics and Popular Song* (London: Hutchinson, 1980).
- Harper, Colin, *Dazzling Stranger: Bert Jansch and the British Folk and Blues Revival* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).
- Hebdige, Dick, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979).
- Heylin, Clinton, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: A Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (London: Penguin, 1993).

- Himmelstein, Abram Shalom, Schweser, Jamie, *Tales of a Punk Rock Nothing* (New Orleans: New Mouth from the Dirty South, 2000).
- Hines, Colin, *Localisation: A Global Manifesto* (London: Earthscan, 2000).
- Hobsbawm, Eric, Ranger, Terence, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).
- Hoggart, Richard, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-class Life with Special Reference to Publications and Entertainments* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957).
- Home, Stewart, *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory And Punk Rock* (Hove: Codex, 1995).
- Howells, Christina, *Derrida: Deconstruction from Phenomenology to Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998).
- Irigaray, Luce, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008).
- Irwin, William, *Death and Resurrection of the Author?* (Westport: Greenwood, 2002).
- James, Martin, *Dave Grohl: Foo Fighters, Nirvana and Other Misadventures* (London: Independent Music Press, 2003).
- Jameson, Frederic, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke, 1991).
- Jarrett, Bede, *Medieval Socialism* (London: Jack, 1913).
- Jennings, J.R., *Georges Sorel: The Character and Development of His Thought* (Oxford: Macmillan, 1985).
- Johnson, Christopher, *Derrida: The Scene of Writing* (London: Phoenix, 2000).
- Johnson, Christopher, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1993).
- Kenny, Anthony, *Wittgenstein* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973).

- Kofsky, Frank, *John Coltrane and the Jazz Revolution* (London: Pathfinder, 1998).
- Kolakowski, Leszek, *Main Currents of Marxism: 3. The Breakdown*, translated by Falla, P. S. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
- Krauss, Rosalind E., *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT, 1997).
- Kropotkin, Peter, *Anarchist Morality* (Edinburgh: Black Cat, 2005).
- Kropotkin, Peter, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Freedom, 1902).
- Laclau, Ernesto, Mouffe, Chantal, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 1985).
- Laing, Dave, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985).
- Laing, Dave, Dallas, Karl, Denselow, Robin, Shelton, Robert, *The Electric Muse: The Story of Folk into Rock*, (London: Methuen, 1975).
- Lash, Scott, Friedman, Jonathan, *Modernity and Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992).
- Leonard, Marion, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock Discourse and Girl Power* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).
- Lenin, V.I., *What is to be Done?: Burning Questions of our Movement* (Moscow: Progress, 1949).
- Levinas, Emmanuel, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1979).
- Lloyd, A.L., *Folk Song in England* (New York: International Publishers, 1967).
- Marcus, Greil, *In the Fascist Bathroom: Punk in Pop Music 1977-1992*, originally titled as *Ranters and Crowd Pleasers* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

- Marcus, Greil, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (London: Picador, 1997).
- Marcus, Greil, *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads* (London: Faber, 2005).
- Marcus, Greil, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).
- Marcus, Greil, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock'n'Roll Music* (London: Faber, 2000).
- Marx, Karl, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, translated by Nicolaus, Martin (Middlesex: Penguin, 1939).
- Marx, Karl, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1956).
- Marx, Karl, *Surveys From Exile: Political Writings Volume 2* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973).
- Marx, Karl, *The First International and After: Political Writings Volume 3* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1974).
- Marx, Karl, *The Revolutions of 1848* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1973).
- Marx, Karl, Engels, Friedrich, *The Communist Manifesto: A Modern Edition* (London: Verso, 1998).
- Marx, Karl, Engels, Frederick, *The German Ideology* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977).
- May, Todd, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

- May, Todd, *Reconsidering Difference: Nancy, Derrida, Levinas and Deleuze* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State, 1997).
- McKay, George, *Circular Breathing: The Cultural Politics of Jazz in Britain* (Durham and London: Duke, 2005).
- McKay, George, *DIY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (London and New York: Verso, 1998).
- McKay, George, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996).
- McClary, Susan, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (London: University of California, 2000).
- McNeil, Legs, McCain, Gillian, *Please Kill Me: The Un-censored Oral History of Punk* (London: Penguin, 1997).
- Middleton, Richard, *Pop Music and the Blues: A Study of the Relationship and its Significance* (London: Gollancz, 1972).
- Middleton, Richard, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open, 1990).
- Middleton, Richard, *Voicing the Popular: On the Subjects of Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
- Middleton, Richard, Horn, David, *Popular Music: A Yearbook, Volume 1, Folk or Popular?: Distinctions, Influences, Continuities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- Millar, Martin, *The Good Fairies of New York* (Brooklyn: Soft Skull, 2006).
- Monem, Nadine, *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* (London: Black Dog, 2007).
- Monk, Ray, *Bertrand Russell 1921-70: The Ghost of Madness* (London: Johnathan Cape, 2000).

- Morland, David, *Demanding the Impossible?: Human Nature and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Social Anarchism* (London: Cassell, 1997).
- Mowitt, John, *Percussion: Drumming, Beating, Striking* (Durham and London: Duke, 2002).
- Munro, Ailie, *The Democratic Muse: Folk Music Revival in Scotland* (Aberdeen: Scottish Cultural Press, 1996).
- Naas, Michael, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham, 2008).
- Nettl, Bruno, *Folk Music in the United States: An Introduction* (Detroit: Wayne State, 1976).
- Newman, Saul, *Power and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought: New Theories of the Political* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Birth of Tragedy*, translated by Clifton P. Fadiman, (New York: Dover, 1995)
- Nuttall, Jeff, *Bomb Culture* (London: Paladin, 1970).
- Oakes, Kaya, *Slanted and Enchanted: The Evolution of Indie Culture* (New York: Holt, 2009).
- O'Brien, Lucy, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Penguin, 1995).
- O'Connor, Alan, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY* (Lanham: Lexington, 2008).
- O'Hara, Craig, *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!!* (San Francisco: AK, 1995).
- Pearce, Kevin, *Something Beginning With O* (London: Heavenly, no date).
- Pickering, Michael, Green, Tony, *Everyday Culture: Popular Song and the Vernacular Milieu* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987).

- Redhead, Steve, *The End-of-the-Century Party: Youth and Pop Towards 2000*
(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990).
- Reiss, Edward, *Marx: A Clear Guide* (London: Pluto, 1997).
- Reynolds, Simon, *Bring The Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop*
(London: Faber, 2007).
- Reynolds, Simon, *Rip It Up And Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber,
2005).
- Reynolds, Simon, Press, Joy, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock'n'Roll*
(London: Serpent's Tail, 1995).
- Richards, Sam, *Sonic Harvest: Towards Musical Democracy* (Oxford: Amber, 1992).
- Ricoeur, Paul, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* (Evanston:
Northwestern University Press, 1974).
- Rimbaud, Penny aka J.J. Ratter. *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life* (Edinburgh and San
Francisco: AK, 1998).
- Ritter, Alan, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Bristol: Cambridge, 1980).
- Russell, Ian, *Singer, Song and Scholar* (Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1986).
- Slobin, Mark, *Subcultural Sounds: Micromusics of the West* (London: Wesleyan
University Press, 1993).
- Sabin, Roger, *Punk Rock, So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge,
1999).
- Savage, John, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock and Beyond*
(New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).
- Seeger, Ruth Crawford, *The Music of American Folk Song* (Suffolk: Boydell &
Brewer, 2001).

- Shank, Barry, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock 'n' Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover: Wesleyan, 1994).
- Shelton, Robert, *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (London: Penguin, 1986).
- Small, Christopher, *Musicking: The Meaning of Musical Performance* (Hannover: Wesleyan, 1998).
- Smith, Adam, *Select Chapters and Passages from The Wealth of Nations* (London: MacMillan, 1915).
- Smith, Adam, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Prometheus, 1991).
- Starr, Pete, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory After May '68* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).
- Russell, Bertrand, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1946).
- Thomas, Michael, *The Reception of Derrida* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).
- Thompson, Stacy, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).
- Toop, David, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995).
- Toynbee, Jason, *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000).
- Trotsky, Leon, *Terrorism and Communism: A Reply to Karl Kautsky* (London: Verso, 2007).
- True, Everett, *Nirvana: The True Story* (London: Omnibus, 2006).
- Vaneigem, Raoul, *Traité de Savoir-vivre à l'usage des Jeunes Generations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

- Vezen, Annette, Vezen, Luc, *Kandinsky et le Cavalier Bleu* (Paris: Pierre Terrail, 1991).
- Walser, Robert, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (California: Wesleyan University Press, 1993).
- Wakefield, Stacy, Grrrt, *Not for Rent: Conversations with Creative Activists in the UK* (Amsterdam and Seattle: Evil Twin, 1996).
- Webb, Peter, *Exploring the Networked Worlds of Popular Music: Milieu Cultures* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).
- Williams, James, *Encounters and Influences: The Transversal Thought of Gilles Deleuze* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2005).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Keegan, 1922).
- Wollaston, Arthur, *Descartes Discourse on Method* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1960).
- Woodcock, George, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1962).
- Young, Rob, *Rough Trade* (London: Black Dog, 2006).
- Žižek, Slavoj, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2008).

Articles in books

Adorno, Theodor, 'On Popular Music' in Firth, Simon, Goodwin, Andrew, *On Record:*

Rock, Pop and the Written Word (London: Routledge, 1990), pp.301-314.

Beardsworth, Richard, 'The Irony of Deconstruction and the Example of Marx' in

Martin McQuillan's *The Politics of Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida and the*

Other of Philosophy (London: Pluto, 2007), pp.212-234.

Brackett, David, '(In Search Of) Musical Meaning: Genres, Categories and

Crossover' in Hesmondhalgh, David, Negus, Keith, *Popular Music Studies*

(Arnold: London, 2002), pp.65-83.

Callinicos, Alex, 'Jacques Derrida and the New International' in Glendinning, Simon,

Eaglestone, Robert, *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy* (Abingdon:

Routledge, 2008), pp.80-9.

Cateforis, Theo, 'How Alternative Turned Progressive: The Strange Case of Math

Rock' in Holm-Hudson, Kevin, *Progressive Rock Reconsidered* (London:

Routledge, 2002)), pp.243-60.

Derrida, Jacques, 'Marx and Sons' in Derrida et al, *Ghostly Demarcations: A*

Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx (London: Verso, 1999),

pp.213-269.

Derrida, Jacques, 'A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event' in Mitchell,

W.J.T., Davidson, Arnold I., *The Late Derrida* (London: University of

Chicago, 2007), pp.223-243.

Drew, Rob, "'Scenes": Dimensions of Karaoke in the United States', in Bennett Andy,

Peterson, Richard A., *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville:

Vandebilt, 2004), pp.64-79.

Eagleton, Terry, 'Marxism Without Marxism' in Derrida et al, *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), pp.82-87.

Frith, Simon, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free": The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community' in Middleton, Richard, Horn, David, *Popular Music: A Yearbook, Volume 1, Folk or Popular?: Distinctions, Influences, Continuities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp.159-168.

Gosling, Tim, "'Not For Sale": The Underground Network of Anarcho-Punk' in Bennett, Andy, Peterson, Richard A., *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville: Vandebilt, 2004), pp.168-179.

Hodgkinson, James A., 'The Fanzine Discourse Over Post-rock', in Bennett and Peterson, *Music Scenes*, pp.221-237.

Kearney, Mary Celeste, 'The Missing Links: Riot Grrrl-Feminism-Lesbian Culture', *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp.207-29.

Leitch, Vincent B., 'Late Derrida: The Politics of Sovereignty', in Mitchell, W.J.T., Davidson, Arnold I., *The Late Derrida* (London: University of Chicago, 2007), pp.11-29.

Leonard, Marion, "'Rebel Girl, You are the Queen of My World": Feminism, "Subculture" and Grrrl Power', *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (London: Routledge, 1997) pp.230-55.

Miller, J. Hillis, 'Derrida Enisled' in Mitchell, W.J.T., Davidson, Arnold I., *The Late Derrida* (London: University of Chicago, 2007), pp.30-58.

Nancy, Jean Luc, 'Philosophy as Chance' in Mitchell, W.J.T., Davidson, Arnold I., *The Late Derrida* (London: University of Chicago, 2007), pp.209-222.

- Negus, Keith, Pickering, Michael, 'Creativity and Musical Experience' in Hesmondhalgh, David, Negus, Keith, *Popular Music Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002).
- Peterson, Richard A., 'Why 1955? Explaining the Advent of Rock Music', in Frith, Simon, *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp.273-297.
- Rosen, Paul, "'It was easy, it was cheap, go and do it!": Technology and anarchy in the UK music industry' in Purkis, Jonathan, Bowen, James, *Twenty-First Century Anarchism: Unorthodox Ideas for a New Millennium* (London: Cassell, 1997), pp.99-116.
- Schilt, Kristin, "'Riot Grrrl Is...": Contestation Over Meaning in a Music Scene' in Bennett, Andy, Peterson, Richard A., *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual* (Nashville: Vandebilt, 2004), pp.115-130.
- Sinker, Mark, 'Concrete, So as to Self-destruct: The Etiquette of Punk, its Habits, Rules, Values and Dilemmas' in Sabin, Roger, *Punk Rock, So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp.120-139.
- Toynbee, Jason, 'Music, Culture and Creativity' in Clayton, Martin, Herbert, Trevor and Middleton, Richard, *The Cultural Study of Music*, (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), pp.102-112.
- Toynbee, Jason, 'Mainstreaming, From Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks' in Hesmondhalgh, David, Negus, Keith, *Popular Music Studies* (Arnold: London, 2002), pp.149-164.

Articles in Journals

- Becker, Howard, 'The Professional Jazz Musician and His Audience', *The American Journal of Sociology* 57/2 (1951), pp.136-44.
- Baulch, Emma, 'Creating a Scene: Balinese Punk's Beginnings', *Journal of Cultural Studies* 5/2 (2002), pp.153-177.
- Davies, Jude, 'The Future of "No Future": Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory', *Journal of Popular Culture* 29/4 (1996), pp.3-25.
- Edwards, Jason, 'The Ideological Interpellation of Individuals as Combatants: An Encounter Between Reinhart Koselleck and Michel Foucault', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 12/1 (2007), pp.49-66.
- Fairchild, Charles, "'Alternative" Music and the Politics of Cultural Autonomy: The Case of Fugazi and the D.C. scene', *Popular Music and Society* 19/1 (1995), 17-35.
- Gangoli, Ramesh, 'Music and Mathematics' in *Perspectives of New Music* 45/2 (2007), pp.51-6.
- Goshert, John Charles, "'Punk" After the Sex Pistols: American Music, Economics, and Politics in the 1980s and 1990s', *Popular Music and Society* 24/1 (2000), pp.85-106.
- Hesmondhalgh, David, 'Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre', *Cultural Studies* 13/1 (1999), pp.34-61.
- Hesmondhalgh, David, 'Post-punk's attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: The Success and Failure of Rough Trade', *Popular Music* 16/3 (1997), pp.255-74.
- Lee, Stephen, 'Re-examining The Concept of the "Independent" Record Company: The Case of Wax Trax! Records', *Popular Music* 14/1 (1995), pp.13-31.

- Matula, Theodore, 'Pow To The People!: The Make-Up's Reorganization of Punk Rhetoric', *Popular Music and Society* 30/1 (2002), pp.19-38.
- O'Connor, Alan, 'Local Scenes and Dangerous Crossroads: Punk and Theories of Cultural Hybridity', *Popular Music* 21/2 (2002), pp.225-236.
- Stock, Jonathon, 'Ordering Performance, Leading People: Structuring an English Folk Music Session,' *World of Music* 46/1 (2004), pp.41-70.
- Strachan, Robert, 'Micro-independent Record Labels in the UK: Discourse, DIY Cultural Production and the Music Industry', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/2 (2007), pp.245-265.

Theses/Unpublished Material

Dale, Pete, *Incorporation and Resistance: A Study of the Mainstreamisation of Punk in the Early 1990s*, MA thesis, Newcastle University, 2005.

Dale, Pete, formal interview with Penny Rimbaud, Newcastle upon Tyne, Saturday 17th May 2007.

Dale, Pete, informal interviews with Amelia Fletcher, Peter Momtchiloff, Jon Slade, Chris Phillips, Rachel Holborow, Gary Walker, Sean Price, John Jervis, Mark Walker, Jason Etherington, Jeff Bateman, Joseph O'Sullivan, James Atkinson, Steve Robson, various locations around the UK between 2006 and 2008.

Gordon, Alastair, *Throwing the Punk Rock Baby Out With the Dirty Bath Water: Crass and Punk Rock, A Critical Appraisal*, BA dissertation, University of Trent, Nottingham, 1996. (Also published as a fanzine, 1996, Do One Press.)

Wendel, Evan, *New Potentials for 'DIY' Music Making: Social Networks, Old and New, and the Ongoing Struggles to Reshape the Music Industry*, MA thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2008.

Fanzines

Where possible I have given the fanzine writer's name. Often only first names or a 'nom de plume' is available, but surnames are given when possible. Where possible the place and or/country of publication has been given. I have most of the zines referenced here in my personal archive.

A New England #6, Richard, Folkestone, UK, 1987.

Are You Scared to Get Happy? #1 and #3, Haynes, Matt, and Mark, Bristol and Sheffield, UK, 1985 and 1986.

Crystal Blue Persuasion #4 fanzine, Rachel, Hampshire, USA, 2001.

Fast Connection #1, Dale, Pete, Holborow, Rachel et al, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 1995.

Last Hours #13, London, UK, 2006.

Lookout! #39, Livermore, Lawrence, San Francisco, USA, 1994.

Maximum Rock'n'Roll #133, Yohannon, Tim et al, Berkeley, California, USA, 1994.

Sarah 4 zine, Matt Haynes, Bristol, UK, 1988.

Sarah 144A: 'Cold', Bristol, Haynes, Matt, Bristol, UK, c.1989.

Searching For the Young Soul Rebels... A Hatebomb, Pete, Kent, UK, 1987.

The Last of the Hippies, Rimbaud, Penny, Epping, UK, c.1984.

Newspaper and Magazine Articles

Alphabetical by periodical. Magazines then follow with issue number, place of publication (where appropriate) and month and year of publication. Newspaper articles include the date of publication and (if appropriate) title of supplement. All finish with page reference within the periodical.

The Guardian, 17th October 2006, G2 supplement, pp.22-3.

The Guardian, 24th November 2006, p.6.

The Living Tradition issue 70, Blaydon, September/October 2006, p.4.

Metro, Tuesday March 3rd 2009, p.19.

Mojo issue 151, London, June 2006, p. 82.

NARC issue 3, Newcastle upon Tyne, April 2006, p.26.

Observer Music Magazine issue 39, November 2006, p.8.

Observer Music Monthly issue 60, August 2008, p.52.

The Stool Pigeon issue 13, London, Oct 2007.

Websites Referenced in Text

Bristol Archive Records section on *Bristol Post Punk 1977 Onwards*,

<http://www.bristolarchiverecords.com/bands.html#BrilliantCorners>

Soft Focus presented by Ian Svenonius, in conversation with Ted Leo,

<http://www.vbs.tv/video.php?id=21851384001> accessed 16th May 2009.

Volcanic Tongue distribution www.volcanictongue.com accessed 16th May 2009.

TimeOut magazine, Simon Reynolds, 'The C86 Indie Scene is Back!', posted 23rd Oct 2006,

http://www.timeout.com/london/music/features/2167/The_C86_indie_scene_is_back.html#articleAfterMpu , accessed 3rd Oct 2010.

Discography

Albums

- Adam and the Ants, *Dirk Wears White Sox*, Do It Records, RIDE 3, 1979.
- Adam and the Ants, *Kings of the Wild Frontier*, LP, CBS, CBS 4549, 1980.
- Alternative TV, *Selected Viewing*, Anagram, GRAM 40, 1989.
- Arctic Monkeys, *Whatever People Say I Am, That's What I'm Not*, CD, Domino, WIGCD, 2006.
- Beat Happening, *Dreamy*, K records, KRD 61031, 2004 (1991, Sub Pop).
- Bikini Kill, *Bikini Kill*, Kill Rock Stars, KRS 204, 1992.
- Bikini Kill, *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah*, Catcall, PUSS001LP, 1993.
- Born Against, *The Rebel Sound of Shit and Failure*, Vermiform, VMFM 20, 1995.
- The Brilliant Corners, *Everything I Ever Wanted: June '85 to March '86*, McQueen Records, MCQLP3, 1988.
- Buzzcocks, 'Boredom', *Spiral Scratch* EP, New Hormones, ORG-1, 1977.
- Circle Jerks, *Group Sex*, Frontier, FLP1002, 1980.
- Clash, The, *The Clash*, CBS, 32232, 1977.
- Crass, *Feeding of the Five Thousand*, Crass records, 621984, 1978.
- Crass, *Stations of the Crass*, Crass Records, 521984, 1979.
- Crass, *Penis Envy*, Crass Records, 321984/1, 1981.
- Conflict, *Increase the pressure*, Mortarhate, MORT 6, 1984.
- Dave Brubeck Quartet, *Time Out*, LP, Columbia, CS 8192, 1965.
- Don Caballero, *What Burns Never Returns*, Touch and Go, TG185, 1998.
- Donnas, The, *The Donnas*, LP, Lookout, LK191, 1998.
- Dr. Feelgood, *Sneakin' Suspicion*, United Artists, FA 3179, 1977.
- Dylan, Bob, *Blonde on Blonde*, CBS, CDCBS 22130, 1966.

- Dylan, Bob, *Bob Dylan Live 1966: The 'Royal Albert Hall' Concert*, Columbia, CB772-DCF-2CDC, 1998.
- Dylan, Bob, *Bringing It All Back Home*, CBS, 62515, 1965.
- Dylan, Bob, *Desire*, Columbia/Sony, CD32570, 1975.
- Dylan, Bob, *Highway 61 Revisited*, Columbia, CB-701-CDM, 1967.
- Dylan, Bob, *John Wesley Harding*, CBS, 63252, 1968.
- Dylan, Bob, *The Times They Are A-Changing'*, Columbia, CL 2105, 1964.
- Elliott, Jack, *Talking Woody Guthrie*, Topic, 12 T 92, c.1963.
- Glasgow, Alex, *Songs of Alex Glasgow Three*, Rubber Records, RUB 030, 1978.
- Good Charlotte, *Young and the Hopeless*, Epic, 86486, 2002.
- Guthrie, Woody, *Pastures of Plenty*, Prism Leisure Corporation, PLATCD 427, 1996.
- Halo Benders, *Don't Tell Me Now*, K records, KLP 46, c.1994-5.
- Huggy Bear, *Weaponry Listens to Love*, LP, Wiiiija, WIJ 37V, 1994.
- Ian Dury and the Blockheads, *New Boots and Panties*, Stiff, SEEZ 4, 1976.
- Jansch, Bert, *Bert Jansch/It Don't Bother Me*, Castle Communication, ESM CD 407, 1996 (1965/1966, Transatlantic Records).
- Jansch, Bert, *From the Outside*, Konnexion, KOMA 788006, 1985.
- Jansch, Bert and Renbourn, John, *Bert and John*, Castle, CMRCD203, 2001 (1966, Transatlantic).
- Karate, *The Bed is in the Ocean*, Southern Records, 18554, 1998.
- Lennon, John, *Lennon Legend*, EMI, 219542, 1997.
- Levellers, The, *One Way of Life: The Best of the Levellers*, Warner/Eastwest, 3984250992, 2002.
- McCarthy, *I am a Wallet*, Midnight Music, CHIME 00.45 S, 1989.
- Moby, *Animal Rights*, Mute, CDSTUMM150, 1996.

- Moss Icon, *Untitled LP*, Vermiform, VERMIFORM 13, 1993.
- Nomeansno, *Wrong*, Alternative Tentacles, VIRUS 77, 1989.
- Pastels, The, *Suck On The Pastels: Retrospective 1983-1985*, Creation, CRELP 031, 1988.
- Pixies, *Doolittle*, 4AD, 60856-1, 1989.
- Ramones, The, *Ramones Mania*, Sire, 925 709-1, 1988.
- Rosehips, The, *The Rosehips*, Secret Records, SHHH CD 971, 1997.
- Seeger, Pete, *If I Had a Hammer: Songs of Hope and Struggle*, Smithsonian Folkways, SF CD 40096, 1998.
- Sex Pistols, *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*, Virgin, CDVX2086, 1987 (originally issued 1977).
- Sham 69, *If the Kids Are United: The Very Best of Sham 69*, Anagram, CDPUNK118, 2004.
- Shellac, *At Action Park*, Touch and Go, TG141, 1994.
- Slits, The, *The Peel Sessions*, Strange Fruit, SFRSCD052, 1998 (1977, BBC Radio 1).
- Slits, The, *Cut*, Island records, ILPS 9573, 1979.
- Slint, *Spiderland*, Touch and Go, TGLP64, 1991.
- Smiths, The, *Hatful of Hollow*, Rough Trade, ROUGH 76, 1984.
- Smiths, The, *Strangeways Here We Come*, Rough Trade, ROUGH CD 106, 1987.
- Smiths, The, *The Smiths*, Rough Trade, ROUGH 61, 1984.
- Specials, The, *The Specials*, Chrysalis, CHR 1265, 1979.
- Stiff Little Fingers, *All The Best*, Chrysalis, CTY 1414, 1983.
- Various Artists, *Anthology of American Folk Music*, Smithsonian Folkways, SFW 40090, 1997 (1952, Folkways).
- Various Artists, *C86*, Rough Trade, ROUGH 100, 1986 (1986, NME).

Various Artists, *Twenty Years of Dischord: Fifty Songs*, double CD, Dischord, DIS 125, 2002.

Singles and EPs

Billy Bragg, 'Days Like These', Chrysalis, GODX8, 1985.

Crass, 'How Does it Feel to be the Mother of a Thousand Dead?', Crass records, 221984/6, 1982.

Crass, 'Nagasaki Nightmare', Crass, 429184/5, 1980.

Crime, 'Hot-wire My Heart', Crime Music, SAC 0188, 1976.

Dead Kennedys, 'Nazi Punks, Fuck Off', Alternative Tentacles, Virus 6, 1980.

Dub Narcotic, 'Fuck Shit Up', K records, DBN 102, 1994.

D:ream, 'Things Can Only Get Better', Magnet, MAG1010CD, 1993.

Frumpies, 'Babies and Bunnies', Kill Rock Stars, KRS 213, 1994.

Huggy Bear, 'Her Jazz', Wiiiija/Catcall, TROUBLE 001, 1993.

Mambo Taxi, 'Prom Queen', Clawfist, HUNKA 13, 1993.

McCarthy, 'Red Sleeping Beauty', Pink Records, PINKY12T, 1986.

Nipple Erectors, 'King of the Bop', Soho Records, SH2, 1978.

Nomeansno, *Wrong*, Alternative Tentacles, VIRUS 77, 1989.

Pussycat Trash, Chocolate Narcotic, 'Plink Plonk Pink Punk', CHOC 003, 1992.

Sea Urchins, 'Pristine Christine', Sarah, SARAH 1, 1987.

The Smiths, 'Shakespeare's Sister', Rough Trade, RT(T)181, 1985.

Stranglers, The, 'Golden Brown', Liberty, BP407, 1982.

Pastels, The, 'I Wonder Why', Rough Trade, RT 137, 1983.

Television Personalities, 'Where's Bill Grundy Now?', Rough Trade, RT033, 1979.

Vibrators, The, 'Judy Says (Knock You in the Head)', Epic, EPC6393, 1978

Flexi Discs

Crass, 'Sheep Farming in the Falklands', Crass records, 121984/3F, 1983.

Videography

The following is a list of audio-visual documentaries referenced in the text, alphabetically by title. Each entry follows with director (if known), production company, duration and the year it entered public release. All are in English and have been available in the public arena.

Afro-punk, dir. James Spooner, Image Entertainment, 66 mins, 2006.

Beyond The Screams: A U.S. Latino Hardcore Punk Documentary, dir. Martín Sorrondeguy, no production company listed, 30 mins, 1999.

Bob Dylan: No Direction Home, dir. Martin Scorsese, Paramount Pictures, 208 minutes, 2005.

Do It Yourself: The Story of Rough Trade, BBC 4, 90 mins, 2009.

Festival! The Newport Folk Festival, dir. Murray Lerner, Red Distribution, 97 minutes, 2005.

Folk Britannia: 1. Ballads and Blues; 2. Folk Roots, New Routes; 3. Between the Wars, dir. Mike Connolly, BBC television, in English, 180 minutes total, 2006.

London Weekend Show, special on punk, length of broadcast unknown, Thames Television, 1976.

The Seven Ages of Rock: 3. Blank Generation (Punk 1973-80), dir. Alastair Lawrence, BBC, 60 mins, 2007.

Seven Ages of Rock: 6. Left of the Dial (Alternative Rock 1980-1994), dir. Alastair Lawrence, BBC, 60 mins, 2007

South Bank Show, special on the Smiths, dir. Tony Knox, ITV, 53 minutes, 1987.

Radio Documentaries

Alan Johnson: Failed Rock Star, episode three, BBC Radio 4, broadcast August 2nd

2010.

In Our Time: Anarchism – A Question of Authority, BBC Radio 4, broadcast

December 7th 2006.

The Singer, Not The Song, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 16th January 2007.