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Julian Heninger
Lakeridge High School

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HARDCORE PUNK FOR A HARDCORE PRESIDENT: THE ACTION AND RESPONSE
TO RONALD REAGAN

By: Julian Heninger

Karen E. Hoppes
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Portland State University
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THE HARDCORE PUNK SCENE

The term “Punk” transcends a plethora of possibilities. Some define it as a strong gathering of disestablishmentarians uniting in opposition. Others would define it as a way of free thinking or even philosophy. Forms of music, art, film and fashion all revolve around this one term. It all started in the 1960’s and 1970’s. But after its inevitable conception, it branched out into different categories, ideals and art forms. Strong white supremacist groups known as the “skin-heads,” hold roots in the punk movement. Conversely, intense African American “gangsta rap” artists found ties to the early Punk movement ideals as well. Music relating to Punk spans a vast amount of classifications. From the hardcore genre Punk rockers in Southern California, to the anarchists in Salt Lake City, to the groundbreaking individuals in New York and Boston, Punk rock was ever-changing and heavily influential on many Americans.¹ But how could one term encompass so many different types of people differing in beliefs, ethnicities and American subcultures? The answer lies within the true meaning of Punk, a true meaning heavily debated today.

Those who search for the core essence of who or what started Punk will scream at each other from across oceans; “The Sex Pistols started Punk! Anarchy in the UK!” or “The

¹ SLC Punk!. Dir. James Merendino. Perf. Produced by Jan de Bont. Sony Pictures Classics, 1999. DVD.

Ramones and the Velvet Underground are the ones who started it all!” Similar arguments exist about what it means to be a Punk and what its true nature is. Some people say, “Fuck the system! Anarchy forever!” While others say, “Fuck the conformist pigs! Down with conformity!” These disputes over the beginning and nature of Punk are petty and play no role in the understanding of Punk’s conception. To comprehend the answers to the questions surrounding the stem of Punk rock, one must only look at the time periods in which it existed to understand. Punk rock was the voice and feelings, personality and purpose, persistence and pleasure of a great amount of people turned in opposition to what was happening around them.

At the beginning of the 1980’s the ethos of Punk turned from just a fashion of black leather and studded belts into something much different. Ronald Reagan took office on January 20, 1981. The events that follow this election changed the face of Punk forever. Punk became a weapon of retaliation for the American people. The argumentative personal lyrics that swirled throughout Punk music grew in ferocity and number. The hotspot of opposition burned in the fiery, sun bleached cities of California. The term, genre and lifestyle known as “Hardcore” was created. Los Angeles and San Francisco emerged as two famous hotspots of Hardcore. The music and people of Punk rock maintained their tenacity and at the same time, brought the defiance to a whole new level. Opposition against Reagan was rampant. The new breed of Punk rock conceived in Southern California was something entirely new. It held more power and control than ever before. Author Ryan Moore wrote in his book, *Smells Like Teen Spirit: Music Youth Culture and Social Crisis*, about how the Hardcore movement differed from previous punk factions.

The punk scenes in San Francisco and Berkeley, respective homelands of the counterculture and the New Left in the 1960s, had much stronger elements of leftist political activism. Los Angeles, on the other hand, was in many ways the capital city of post modernity, owing to its economy of

image and entertainment, de-centered suburban sprawl, and apparent lack of history or community.²

The music coming out of these places was fast, aggressive and angry. The lyrics were shouts of complaints that the musicians had about society. The “leftist political activism” is the reason the Hardcore movement was so powerful. The complaints Americans had about society and their lives in general were directed towards Ronald Reagan and the decisions he was making as president. The conservative methods of Reagan’s economic plans and social views clashed with those in Punk. The Hardcore movement of Punk in Southern California can be used as a lens to see a much more realistic, down-and-dirty, approval rating poll of Ronald Reagan. Author Sharon M. Hannon quotes artist Winston Smith in her book, *Punks: A Guide to an America Subculture*, saying, “Ronald Reagan was a catalyst for the hardcore scene.”³ Hannon continued to back up Winston Smith’s claim by saying:

With the country in a recession, plagued by high inflation and unemployment, the bands, full of disaffected young white men, seemed united in their opposition against Reagan. To these kids, many from broken families, the American dream was elusive. They were angry. For them, it was not the ‘the morning in America’ that Reagan had promised.⁴

The actions Reagan took during his presidency directly affected the attitudes of the Punk movement, and much more importantly, the attitudes of the American people. Ronald Reagan was all about attitude. He was incredibly invested in creating an “attitude” of sunshine and happiness in America in order to get the American public to accept his decisions as president.

² Ryan, Moore. *Smells Like Teen Spirit: Music Youth Culture and Social Crisis* (New York City, New York: New York University Press, 2010), 50.

³ Sharon M. Hannon. *Punks: A Guide to an America Subculture* (Santa Barbara, California: Greenwood Press, 2010), 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*

By painting everything in a nice picture, it made it hard for people to disagree. Reagan's motto which ran in his 1984 presidential re-election ads was "Morning in America." The ad content was this:

*It's morning again in America. Today more men and women will go to work than ever before in our country's history. With interest rates at about half the record highs of 1980, nearly 2,000 families today will buy new homes, more than at any time in the past four years. This afternoon 6,500 young men and women will be married, and with inflation at less than half of what it was just four years ago, they can look forward with confidence to the future. It's morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?*⁵

However, the situation Reagan put on a large portion of Americans differed from this vision. The futuristic view of the ad was central to Reagan's campaign. Everything had a forward outlook. But the people of Punk were worried about the present. The anger they harvested came from the direct economic plights Reagan's policies put on them. When Reagan signed the Tax Reform Act of 1986, many people were living in a nightmare rather than a sunny morning. This tax reform eliminated many middle class tax deductions and pardoned the rich. The middle class was hit hard. The ambition and futuristic trajectory of Reagan was a core element in the creation of his economic plan. The goals of Reagan's economic plan were similar to many goals today. Reagan was quoted as saying, "The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes."⁶ He then later said, "Let us go forward with an historic reform for fairness, simplicity, and incentives for growth." Many tax experts would agree that Reagan's words and goals were noble in nature:

⁵ Wikipedia: *Morning in America*. Full add text

⁶ Larry Berman. Looking back on the Reagan Presidency. Baltimore (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 7.

These two statements—although not totally consistent with each other—provide a useful bench mark for assessing the Reagan impact on structural tax policy. This is true not just because these are Ronald Reagan’s words; I and many other scholars of tax policy would accept them as shorthand description of generally appropriate tax policy. Taken together, these two statements suggest that to the extent consistent with the mutual achievement of other goals, the tax system should be fair, economically neutral, simple and conducive to economic growth.⁷

However, the methods Reagan used to “achieve” his goals were problematic. The goals were rather simple and fall into a generally agreeable economic plan; however, the actual outcomes of Reagan’s economics did not completely follow the “mission statements” above. Reagan’s macroeconomic objectives were not groundbreaking in any way. In fact, they bore heavy resemblance to preceding economic plans that many American presidents had adopted. Reagan did, however, have one big change that made his economic plan more unique. Reagan reweighted his macroeconomic objectives. He clearly laid out who and what were the biggest priorities in the system he developed.⁸ In Reagan’s Tax Reform Act of 1986, many people began to feel this reweighting in the form of “unreduced tax reductions” (or in simple terms, effectively raised taxes). The Tax Reform Act had a large impact on the Alternative Minimum Tax. The Alternative Minimum Tax was originally a law targeting untaxed, wealthy investors. But under the Tax Reform Act, the Alternative Minimum Tax burden fell onto middle class Americans owning a home with children, or those who lived in high tax states. The people who earned higher incomes (exceeding \$1,000,000) proportionally felt much less impact than the middle class. But it was not just the Tax Reform Act that favored the rich, but also the true core

⁷ Author Berman Larry discussing his view of Reagan’s ambitions for the economic plan. Larry Berman. Looking back on the Reagan Presidency. Baltimore (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

⁸ Paraphrased from Isabel Sawhill, a writer with deep background on economics, quoted by Berman.

of Reagan's economic package. The outcome of Reagan's "priorities" resulted in an imbalanced scale of income taxation:

The premise of the administration's supply-side economics was that reducing federal spending and cutting taxes would stimulate the economy. The supply-side theory argued that added tax saving would be invested by upper-income people, who benefitted most from the tax act.⁹

David Stockman was Reagan's man in charge for the economy as the Director of the Office of Management and Budget. He even described the tax cut as a "Trojan Horse" that would aid the rich, saying that, "None of us really understand what's going on with these numbers."¹⁰ This, in itself, earned a proper Punk rock response.

The complaints of unfairness were truly justified. The nation began experiencing the side effects of Reagan's reweighting. The year following enactment of the Tax Reform Act, America began to look much different. Author Varghese Kozhimannil was well aware of the situation. He describes what real mornings in America truly looked like after the Tax Reform Act of 1986:

On August 31, 1987, on an RR train from Whitehall Street during the morning rush hour two men slept, each outstretched on two seats of a crowded train. Unfortunately, we don't have to go to India or any other Third-World country to witness poverty firsthand. A walk through our own neighborhoods and even our wealthy suburbs bring us face to face with the poor...I personally experienced disappointment at the city and federal administration levels...I hope my work would improve the conditions of those at the bottom of the social ladder and also help the

⁹ Larry Berman discussing Reagan's income taxation. Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

middle-income group. It is my earnest desire that these concerns will be heard and that changes will be made in the government.¹¹

Varghese wrote these words a year after the Tax Reform Act and they later appeared in his book published in 1989. The relevance of his words to the time period showed the darker side of Reagan's Tax Policies. The poverty was tangible. The motivation and "earnest desires" to make a difference revealed the attitude of many people in the time period. Different is what people wanted. Different is what Punk was about. The Punk scene rose to the occasion to battle Reagan's actions. The Hardcore Punk rockers grabbed Americans by the collar and shook them, screaming at the top of their lungs, to snap out of the morning dream that Reagan cast over America, and to wake up and see the poverty of the tax-stricken middle class before them. It was a direct filter and attack cannon for those from afflicted homes to express their feelings towards the Reagan institution. A large majority of the people in the Hardcore scene were disaffected young white men who had come from broken families.¹² The similarly broken middle class came together in a united opposition that could seriously make a difference. In an interview from the film *American Hardcore* artist Vic Bondi is quoted: "Everyone was saying it was morning in America. Someone had to say, 'It's fucking midnight!'"¹³ Bondi was a member of Punk band *Articles of Faith* and his words resonate with what many Americans were feeling during the 1980s. After seeing what Reagan's "Morning in America" actually looked like, the people were dissatisfied and angry. Unkept promises drove many to the Hardcore movement. In the Hardcore scene, America was portrayed in newer, more horrific way. No longer was

¹¹ Varghese Kozhimannil discussing the severe poverty in America during Reagan's Presidency. T. Varghese Kozhimannil. *Awake America! Are You Better Off? The Reagan presidency: Promises and Performances* (New York: Cimothas Pub, 1989), 1.

¹² Sharon Hannon's description of those in the Hardcore Punk scene. 6.

¹³ *American Hardcore* Dir. Paul Rachman, Produced by AHC Productions. Sony Pictures Classics, 2006. DVD.

nationalism apparent in the hearts of these people. The America they knew was only one of broken families and bad times. Through Reagan's actions, the degradation of the American dream occurred. "The American idea of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' is virtually absent in the real life struggle."¹⁴ People simply began giving up on their earlier nationalistic philosophies.

Problems on American soil were not the only instigators of Punk rebellion. Reagan's foreign policy and more importantly, methods of handling foreign problems, created great unrest in the hearts and minds of the already angered hardcore Punks. The famous Iran Contra Scandal that occurred during Reagan's presidency had a large impact on the Punk scene. The main element of the scandal was the secret provision of arms to Iran (in violation of an embargo) in exchange for the returning of American hostages. Normally, the Hardcore Punk scene would not have much to say about things literally foreign to them. But the reaction that Hardcore Punk rockers had to the Iran Contra Scandal shows the actual power and awareness of the movement. The exchange of arms for hostages with Iran was not what fanned the flames of Punk intensity, but the methods Reagan used as President to accomplish it. In order to pull off the releasing of hostages for arms, Reagan circumvented Congress and flexed rather questionable muscles of Executive Branch power. Dan Johnson grew up in Salinas, California and spent most of his Punk years in the heart of the Hardcore scene in Los Angeles. Upon hearing a question about Iran Contra, he immediately offered a new Punk perspective that is often not portrayed in reactions to Reagan's foreign policy.

¹⁴ T. Varghese Kozhimannil. *Awake America! Are You Better Off? The Reagan presidency: Promises and Performances*. New York: Cimothas Pub, 1989.

The government was doing its own thing. As young people we were not involved. The big conservative push of Reagan seemed completely out of our reach to do anything. The Iran Contra Scandal really pissed me off. The government essentially ran amuck. It was disheartening and disgusting to us. Reagan was such a zealot for the Constitution but then he turned around and subverted the whole thing, bartering for hostages and selling weapons.¹⁵

Dan Johnson's feeling towards the whole situation largely sum up the feelings of the Punk movement as a whole. Many Punks felt lied to and cheated. They were tired of Reagan and his conservatism. But the main thing they had a problem with was the fact that he contradicted himself. Reagan had always discussed how the Constitution was supremely important. In his remarks at the Bicentennial Observance of the Battle of Yorktown in Virginia, October 19, 1981, he said, "Our Founding Fathers devised a system of government unique in all the world—a federation of sovereign States, with as much law and decision-making authority as possible kept at the local level." But when it came to the White House's secret operation of selling arms to Iran (in direct violation of American law) in exchange for releasing American hostages, Reagan acted without consent or knowledge of Congress. Using tricky stratagems and diversion of funds, Reagan's operatives were able to pull it off. The disregard for the constitutional checks and balances system was the real contradiction. Now, something to understand about Punks is that they cast all blame and offer little solution. Punk was about pointing fingers and getting angry. The one thing Punks hated more than conformity and any action Reagan took as president was a poser. A poser is a walking contradiction. In a film comically glorifying and documenting the Punk scene in Salt Lake City, the fictional main character, Stevo, voices his feelings on posers,

¹⁵ Dan Johnson. Personal interview. 09 June. 2012.

There were quite a few punks in the SLC back in '85, but there were equally as many posers. Posers were kids who would dress and act like punks but they did it for fashion. They were fools! They'd say shit like... Anarchy in the U.K.! See what I mean? Posers. 'Anarchy in the U.K.' What the fuck's that? It was a Sex Pistols thing. That's where they were from, they were British! They were allowed to go on about anarchy in the U.K. but what does that mean to us in Utah, America? That's all you ever hear from these trendy fucks.¹⁶

It was not just the Punks who felt lied to and cheated after Iran Contra, but also the American people. Larry Berman offers more insight;

The inquiry revealed little accountability for covert operations, deception of Congress and the American people, a disregard for checks and balances as the rule of law, a reliance on private citizens to execute secret policy, and White House staffing arrangements that isolated the President while protecting him with a cloak of deniability.¹⁷

The close correlation between the Hardcore Punks' frustration and the disenchantment of the rest of the American public bolsters the credibility of using the Punk movement as an historical expression of the time period. When looking at events through the Punk time period and perspective, accurate portrayals of what many people were feeling can be found.

As Reagan's policies expanded in reach, America was feeling the newness of the Hardcore Punk movement. Americans felt all the grungy lyrics and grimy fists being pumped up into the air. Hardcore truly began to become an accepted way of life for many Americans. Just as the Hardcore movement began reaching its peak, Reagan spurred a new movement that would ultimately end the Hardcore one. For many of the Hardcore movement followers, the music and lifestyle was a way to cope with their complaints about society. But many times the Hardcore scene was not enough. Followers also turned to heavy drugs. Under the influence,

¹⁶ SLC Punk!. Dir. James Merendino. Perf. Produced by Jan de Bont. Sony Pictures Classics, 1999. DVD.

¹⁷ Berman, 15.

they were disorganized and began to lose the true power in their grasp. The focused activism became even more violent, and in the end, Hardcore literally tore itself apart. But what shifted their attention from leftist political activism towards drugs was another Reagan, Nancy Reagan, that is. Nancy began her own personal “war on drugs” campaign. Many Hardcore Punks took this as a war on their way of life. Nancy’s campaign differed from previous warring on drugs. She became a figure head for the anti-drug lifestyle. The Hardcore movement skewed from fighting a war on political ideology, and became more of a movement protecting drugs. It truly says a lot about what was deemed vital to the Hardcore Punks during the time period.

Aside from the fact that many Punk users enjoyed how the drugs made them feel, they fought against the Nancy Reagan war on drugs for another reason. The term coined by Nancy Reagan for her entire anti-drug campaign was, “Just say no.” The simple, powerful, straightforward phrase was the easiest, superficial conclusion to reach about how to end the drug problem. However, it is infantile and naïve to believe, “if everybody says no, then nobody will do it.” The problems surrounding drug culture in America are vastly complex issues with many aspects. The Punk movement interpreted the “just say no” words as a direct attack. It was as if Nancy Reagan had just said “No” to their lifestyle. Hardcore was indeed the “core” essence of those in the movement. They lived it, breathed it, smoked it, drank it, and swallowed it. Extreme opposition rose up. The perfect example comes in the form of Punk artist Mojo Nixon’s song entitled, “I ain’t gonna piss in no jar.” A portion of the lyrics are included below;

Well I ain't gonna pee-pee in no cup
Unless Nancy Reagan's gonna drink it up
Said 'yo, Nancy,' we just say NO, no, no-no-no-no-no
Well, go ahead and fire me from my job

'Cause there's one little thing you ain't gonna rob
That' my freedom and my liberty.¹⁸

The war on the war on drugs, fought by the Punks, became less about the drugs themselves and much more about not being told what to do. That is another “great” thing about Punks, they hate being told what to do. The significance of Mojo Nixon’s song was that it truly was a direct counter reaction to the Reagan institution. Mojo however, was by no means isolated in using music to voice opinion to the Reagan institution. In fact, some bands were created for the sole purpose of tearing down the foundations on which Ronald and Nancy stood. The use of explicitly straight-forward lyrics, jam-packed with anger and “suggestion,” provides a revealing database of information to show how many Americans reacted to Reagan as a president.

Perhaps the best example, of all the thousands of Punk bands, would be *Reagan Youth*. The group, as can be seen in their title, was created for the purpose of destroying the ideals and support system for the Reagan Institution. Band members Dave Rubinstein (Insurgent Dave) and Paul Bakija (Paul Cripple) rocked out in New York slinging Reagan-inspired hate out into America’s airwaves. The Hardcore scene had finally been brought eastward. A historical parallel is drawn to Adolf Hitler in the naming of the band. The Hitler Youth was one of the famous Nazi groups in Germany during Hitler’s reign. *Reagan Youth* pays a crude and offensive homage to Reagan by creating this parallel. In their song entitled *Reagan Youth*, they make rather direct parallels to Reagan and Hitler:

We are the sons of Reagan ...Heil!
We are the godforsaken ...Heil!
The right is our religion
We'll watch television
Tons of fun and brainwashed slime
We are the sons of Reagan ...Heil!

¹⁸ Mojo, Nixon. “I Ain’t Gonna Piss In No Jar,” *Root Hog Or Die*. CD. 1984.

We are the unawakened ...Heil!
 Want another war?
 Forward to El Salvador!
 Gonna kill some communists!
 we are Reagan Youth! ...Heil! Heil! Heil!
 Reagan Youth! ...Sieg Heil!¹⁹

Dave and Paul both correlate Hitler's oppression of millions of people to their lives under the Reagan Institution. Although disproportionate in suffering, their point still comes across. This point hit close to home with all those rocking out in the Hardcore scene. They felt oppressed under Reagan. Their livelihoods and lifestyles clashed with everything Reagan stood for. The Reagan Institution condemned the insanity of the Punk rocker's Hardcore, drug induced life. Another song by *Reagan Youth* entitled *No Class*, discusses the feelings of oppression:

The old timer tries to socialize me
 And keep me neatly in my place
 Excuse me I'm not a category
 And cheap repression's not my taste²⁰

The Hardcore Punks would not allow Reagan to continue his conservative reign without him, and everybody, knowing that they felt repressed and angry. They pointed their fingers, raised their fists and moshed to the violent beat of opposition pulsating through America. The lens provided by the Hardcore scene's resistance to Reagan provides an entirely different and alternative angle to the typical historical accounts of Reagan's presidency. Allusions to Reagan today are often saturated with praise and honor. A more realistic viewing of Reagan would include the Punk scene's interpretation. Although dirty and often disgusting, it is important to

¹⁹ Insurgent Dave. Lyrics. "Reagan Youth" *Youth Anthems for the New Order*. Vinyl. High 5 Studios. 1984.

²⁰ Insurgent Dave. Lyrics. "No Class" *Youth Anthems for the New Order*. Vinyl. High 5 Studios. 1984.

remember the angry, desperate, Hardcore Punks, singing their sadistically silly yet potently powerful messages out on the sun bleached sidewalks of Southern California. Reagan's presidency included both apotheosis and damnation all at once. Hardcore Punk in itself reveals the darker truth and repercussions of Reagan's presidency. This is why the only possible way to understand reactions to the Reagan Institution is to get your hands dirty and dig through the wonderfully insane world of the Hardcore Punk movement.

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