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“If Only I Could Get a Job Somewhere.” The Emergence of British Punk

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“IF THERE WERE JOBS, WE’D BE SINGING ABOUT LOVE AND KISSES.”
 — THE CLASH, IN A 1976 INTERVIEW WITH *THE TIMES*

Like all radical social movements, punk was born nameless. In the 1800s, “punk” referred to “something worthless,” and by the early 1900s had come to more specifically reference a worthless young person or hoodlum.¹ However, “punk” as the term for an emerging scene in the 1970s was derived from *Punk* magazine, founded in 1975 by John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil. Featured in the very first issue of *Punk* was a cartoon titled “Do It Yourself: Sixties Protest Song” (figure 1). Clearly exhibited in the illustration’s satirical lyrics are many of punk’s trademarks, such as a strong anti-establishment streak and an affinity for irony, mockery, and dark humor. Predictably, one can also observe punk’s obvious sense of disillusionment and dissatisfaction with the social environment from which it arose: England, in the mid-1970s, was



Figure 1. Robert Romagnoli. “Do It Yourself: Sixties Protest Song,” *Punk Magazine*, January 1976.

¹ “Punk,” Thesaurus.com, *Roget's 21st Century Thesaurus, Third Edition*, Philip Lief Group, 2009.

embroiled in a crushing recession during which more than a million people were out of work and the inflation rate rose to above 18 percent.² The optimism of the sixties was fading fast. Punk, in many ways, can be considered the natural result of this atmosphere: the movement was the loud, cynical, spiky-haired child of Britain's terrible economic recession, as illustrated by the culture's various forms of expression from musical lyrics to fashion, and exemplified by the Clash, Sex Pistols, and Crass.

Unlike in the seventies, British culture in the sixties is generally described as being full of optimism and a sense of progress. The teenage generation of this decade was the first free of conscription, and the 'peace and love' hippie movement was rising on both sides of the pond. Music played an integral role in the changing identities of youth. In 1945, there were probably a few hundred jukeboxes in the country, but by 1958 there were an estimated thirteen thousand.³ As music became considerably more available to the masses, the significance of its role in shaping culture and society — and in reflecting popular sentiment — increased. Arthur Marwick wrote in his book *The Sixties* that the decade was characterized by “a participatory and uninhibited popular culture, whose central component was rock music, which in effect became a kind of universal language.”⁴ English musician, critic, and art historian George Melly, quoted in *The Sixties*, remembered the era: “Silly and transient [though] they may have been, at least they were alive, kicking and, above all, hopeful.”⁵ Conversely, while punk rock and the years from

² Kenneth J Bindas. “‘The Future Is Unwritten’: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982.” *American Studies* 34, no. 1 (1993): 69

³ Rhona Gordon. "Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture 1945-60 by Adrian Horn." *The Kelvingrove Review*.

⁴ Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy, and the United States, c. 1958-c.1974* (Oxford University Press).

⁵ Ibid.

which it arose are generally considered to be many things, “hopeful” is not often one of them. As music journalist Neil McCormick described for *The Telegraph*, there was “a kind of falling off in the Seventies, an erosion of pie-in-the-sky idealism, a deflation of Sixties utopianism.”⁶ England in the decade before punk retained the sense of prosperity and hope for a better future that had developed during the post-war economic improvements; furthermore, this England of the sixties, with its “idealism” and “utopianism,” in many ways barely resembles the climate from which the bitter, disillusioned punk movement was born.

Research performed last year found that twice as many people chose the sixties as being the decade in which “Britain was at its greatest” than any other.⁷ When asked which year specifically represented Britain’s peak, the second most common answer was 1966, the year in which England won the World Cup. (The most common answer was 1945, the end of the Second World War). Furthermore, the median year of British greatness was found to be 1960.⁸ Although a complex ten years, England’s days from 1960 through 1970 are generally held to be an extremely positive time for the nation, as this data shows.

In 1964, the National Association of Youth Clubs conducted research on youth behavior on the August Bank Holiday in Brighton. “To sum up,” the resulting report concluded, “most of the boys and girls on the loose in Brighton were looking for excitement, ‘kicks’ and adventure, not for violence. Most of this could constitute nothing more than high spirits.”⁹ This kind of

⁶ Neil McCormick, "The Diamond Decades: The 1970s," *The Telegraph*, May 30, 2012.

⁷ Will Dahlgreen, "Britain 'was greatest in the sixties'," YouGov: What the world thinks, May 10, 2016.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ H. Haywood, "*Weekenders: Youth Behaviour on the August Bank Holiday in Brighton, 1965*," report (London: National Association of Youth Clubs, 1965)

buoyant description of British youth differs greatly from those published just a decade later — especially those of punks. As a 1977 NBC News Report, quoted in CNN’s original series “The Seventies” stated: punk rock’s “purpose is to promote violence, sex and destruction, in that order.”¹⁰ Apparently, in just twelve years, England’s youth had gone from being uninterested in violence to touting it above all else.

So, what changed? Why did Britain’s glory days fail to live on into the seventies? And (as shall be addressed in the following pages) what is it about England’s seventies, rather than some other decade, which fertilized the growth of such an unprecedented culture as punk? Questions such as these were being asked before the decade had even finished its run, as illustrated by English cultural theorist Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, published in 1979. In his introduction, Hebdige wrote that “no subculture has sought with more grim determination than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms, nor to bring down upon itself such vehement disapproval.”¹¹ Hebdige, perhaps the first academic to acknowledge the extent of punk’s cultural significance, traced its artistic roots to sources from the philosophy of nihilism to classical avant-garde works. Following his lead, scholars, academics, historians, and high school seniors have since turned their curious eyes to punk’s contradictory, safety-pin-piercing-riddled face, and come away with a huge variety of interpretations, opinions, and analyses.¹²

¹⁰ Tom Hanks and Playtone, prods., *The Seventies*, transcript, CNN, June 11, 2015.

¹¹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1st ed. (London: Routledge, 1979).

¹² Anyone interested in the history of the study of punk could begin by consulting Leon Neyfakh’s excellent “The Rise of Punkademia,” written for *The Boston Globe* in 2011.

Of course, in the early seventies, as the movement was being riotously born, punks were hardly concerned with academic examinations of their activity. They simply, as Sex Pistol Steve Jones said, wanted to “get out of [ordinary life] as much as possible.”¹³ Considering the state of ordinary English life in punk’s formative years, this is not a surprising statement.

“Punk,” Michael Church wrote for the *Times* in 1976, is “an angry aesthetic negativity, bred in the dole queues.” As Church suggests, a huge amount (if not the majority) of that which we now define as ‘punk’ can be traced back to the effects of the recession suffered by England in the 1970s. And the suffering was severe: unemployment in those years rose to levels higher by far than any seen since the 1930s.¹⁴ In 1970, over half a million Brits were unemployed; by 1979, the number was nearly 1.5 million.¹⁵ The country had a national debt of £8.4 billion, and in 1976, the country had to be bailed out by the International Monetary Fund.¹⁶ The economic situation overall was summed up neatly in *Twentieth-Century British Social Trends*:

In the mid-1970s, the economy was stagnating, inflation was high, unemployment rising, public sector borrowing unprecedentedly high for a period of peace, and the era of growing government came to an end ... the winter of 1973/74 can be taken as a turning point of a 30-year economic boom into a period of recession and readjustment affecting the whole of the ‘first world’ and not least the United Kingdom.¹⁷

After the Oil Crisis of late 1973 caused a national panic and fear of fuel shortages, Prime Minister Edward Heath announced several conservation methods, including a manual 10:30 pm turn-off time for television (except for Christmas), as well as the implementation of the ‘three-

¹³ Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

¹⁴ A. H. Halsey and Josephine Webb, eds., *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, 3rd ed. (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000).

¹⁵ Halsey, *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, 314.

¹⁶ Peter Pugh and Carl Flint, *Thatcher for Beginners* (Cambridge: Icon Books Ltd., 1997), 16.

¹⁷ Halsey, *Twentieth Century British Social Trends*, 335.

day week' for every industry. In an address to the nation on December 13th, 1973, Heath warned that "in terms of comfort, we shall have a harder Christmas than we have known since the war."¹⁸ In the twenty years preceding 1970, only two "state of emergencies" had been declared; during his almost-four-year-term, Heath declared no less than five.¹⁹ Clearly, the economic situation in the country at the time can be considered dire at worst and miserable at best.

Punk was the social and artistic consequence of this depression. Caroline Coon, who wrote for the British music newspaper *Melody Maker*, saw punk as "a movement that could only occur in a deteriorating economic environment."²⁰ The Clash, in an interview with *The Times* in 1976, agreed: "If there were jobs, we'd be singing about love and kisses."²¹ In other words, it was because of the British recession of the seventies that punks were who they were, with the ideas and perspectives that they had. Bernard Rhodes, manager of the Clash, is quoted in "*The Future is Unwritten: The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982*": "I was listening to the radio in '75 and there was some expert blabbing about how if things go on as they are there'll be eight hundred thousand people unemployed by 1979 ... that was the root of punk."²² Even to contemporary members of the movement such as Rhodes, it was clear that their subculture was heavily influenced by the economy. English punks were not resentful of nothing; instead they were the direct product of an extremely challenging era for their country.

¹⁸ Edward Heath: "Harder Christmas than we have known since the War", perf. Prime Minister Edward Heath, Msn.com, February 3, 2010.

¹⁹ Francis Wheen, "State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974 by Dominic Sandbrook," review of *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974*, *The Gaurdian*, September 25, 2010.

²⁰ Robert Christgau, "We Have to Deal With It: Punk England Report," *The Village Voice*, 1978, October 18, 2005.

²¹ Michael Church, "Catching up with punk," *The Times* (London), November 29, 1976.

²² Bindas, "The Future Is Unwritten': The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982."

Punk is often described as a ‘working-class subculture’ for a reason; it was a movement of and for those without money and privilege, made pessimistic by a lack of possibility and broken promises of progress, as illustrated by the lyrics of punk rock. When the Clash were asked what their lyrics were about, they replied: “career opportunities.”²³ The lyrics of the Sex Pistols’ “No Future (God Save the Queen)” are typical of the punk mindset: “There is no future / In England’s dreaming.”²⁴ In contrast, the aspiring, upbeat, culture of the sixties’ hippie movement was decidedly future-oriented, sure of the possibility of a better world and concerned with building it. To borrow from John Lennon’s “Mind Games,” there existed a “faith in the future out of the now.”²⁵ The difference between this perspective and that of punks like the Sex Pistols is easily observable; for them, even in the “dreaming” of their nation, there was “no future.” The lyrics of “Do They Owe us a Living,” a 1978 song by Crass, act as another example of the punk point of view. The band blames an unspecified “they” for the “state of the nation” and their economic woes:

The living that is owed to me, I’m never going to get
Bugged this whole world up, up to their necks in debt [...]
Do they owe us a living?
Course they do, course they do²⁶

Revealed in these lyrics are several characteristics typical of how the punk scene viewed the economy. Foremost is the anger and sense of having been wronged. After all, the parents of

²³ Church, "Catching up with punk."

²⁴ John Lydon, "No Future," by Glen Matlock, Paul Thomas Cook, and Stephen Philip Jones, recorded October 1976, Sex Pistols, Chris Thomas, 1977, vinyl recording.

²⁵ John Lennon, "Mind Games," recorded July & aug. 1973, John Lennon, John Lennon, 1973, vinyl recording.

²⁶ Crass, "Do They Owe Us a Living?" recorded 1978, 1978, vinyl recording.

punk's generation, while children during the war, came of age and developed their financial independence in a *post*-World War II Britain, an era distinguished by idealism and continually better standards of living.²⁷ Yet the next generation was unable to access the advantages of their parents. In fact, they could not even get a job. This contributed to a general feeling that the youth of the seventies had not been given what they felt they were “owed,” including financial security and opportunity — a “living.” Additionally, these lyrics further illustrate the pessimism of “No Future.” Not only does Crass write that they are being wrongly denied a living, but also that they are “never going to get” it. There is no sense of positive change just over the horizon. Instead, there is an utter hopelessness, a byproduct of the severity of Britain's economic woes, which were only made more pronounced by their contrast to the past decades of prosperity.

Because punk was so deeply the product of its economic surroundings, it began to identify with them, and in general, punks tended to consider themselves outcasts — disadvantaged, marginalized, and poor. Furthermore, as punk culture developed an economically independent identity, it began to resent the financial behavior of its predecessors. In the words of John Lydon (better known as Johnny Rotten, lead singer of the Sex Pistols), “[the musicians that] came out of the ever-so-generous-and-love-everyone Sixties ... soon turned into fucking greedy, shifty little businessmen ... They became like little royal families unto themselves ... See? The system! They became it.”²⁸ Lydon's words highlight punk's animosities towards the flourishing and optimistic sixties, the economic elite (“shifty little businessmen”) and the political elite (“little royal families”).

²⁷ Ann Hansen, *Direct Action: Memoirs of an Urban Guerrilla* (AK Press, 2002).

²⁸ John Lydon, *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (Picador, 2008).

Members of the punk movement embraced this outsider identity so whole-heartedly that their style became a reflection and representation of destitution as well. Punk style was ‘DIY’ (do-it-yourself); it was homespun, an amalgamation of threadbare re-used clothing, obscene and irreverent phrases, and safety pins. Dick Hebdige, author of the aforementioned early analysis of punk *Subculture*, wrote about punk fashion as “bricolage,” as it was a composite, made up of a diverse range of whatever was available. In other words, punks took what was accessible to them — in this case, secondhand garments and clothing typical of the working class — and both welcomed and redefined them.²⁹ Punks were the product of financial hardship and had no desire to be seen as anything else.

The musical style of punk rock, too, can be traced back to the nation’s economic ailment. Simon Frith, as quoted in *Market Failure: Punk Economics, Early and Late* argued in *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* that punk was an “independent, economic alternative” to domineering, international, bureaucratic record companies.³⁰ The harsh volume, untraditional vocal stylings, and minimal ‘three chord’ musical structure which characterizes punk rock are the product of musicians who for the most part did not have the ability to afford music school or advanced recording equipment.

So where is punk today, in an age when it the making of music is cheaper and more accessible than ever? Throughout the 1980s, punk fractured and split into a seemingly infinite array of sub-subcultures. Nazi punks, sometimes referred to as ‘hatecore,’ focused on the original movement’s resentment, blame, and anger, combining the racist philosophy of Hitler’s Nazi

²⁹ Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.

³⁰ Stacy Thompson, "Market Failure: Punk Economics, Early and Late," *College Literature* 28, no. 2 (2001): 48-64.

party with the aesthetics and expressions of '70s English punk (which was generally socially liberal) to create the radical right wing of the greater punk scene. Opposing Nazi punk, at the other extreme of the spectrum, is the straight edge movement. Straight edge punks are those who reject the excesses of mainstream punk and refrain from using drugs and alcohol; many are also vegetarian or vegan. "Hardcore" is possibly the least niche of punk's many modern divisions; it is a catchall term referring to any punk that is faster, more violent, and more aggressive than its early form. Later, in the 1990's, American "grunge" (as typified by Nirvana and Pearl Jam) would incorporate many elements from punk rock. In the 2000's, punk became associated with commercial enterprises such as the clothing store Hot Topic and the Vans Warped Tour, which some saw as the logical, modernized version of punk; others as the "selling out" of the movement. As of today, countless eulogies and obituaries mourning the death of punk have been written, beginning as early as 1978 with the release of Crass' song "Punk is Dead." Arguably, however, punk is not dead but rather transformed, diversified today into these many individual splinters, each of which retains elements of the original punks of the seventies (and thus the effects of Britain's depression).

Throughout history, every artistic and social movement has been the product of its time and context of origin, punk being no exception. Punk's influence on our modern-day understandings of rebellion, music, and youth expression is undeniable; even at its most basic level, it represents a human response to economic hardship. When one feels hopeless, that they are without opportunity, where do they turn? To music, punk seems to answer, and to radical new forms of self-expression.

When considering the term “economics,” it is easy to picture nothing more than Excel sheets, graphs of stock market trends, and blank-eyed men in business suits. And yet, the economy is more than some ancient, abstract system operating invisibly and constantly. Economic developments are inherently social developments, intricately related to the daily lives of every person living within a given economic system. In the case of England’s seventies, punk music and art acted as language, enabling a dialogue between a struggling people and the economy. While it may be tempting to dismiss punk rock as nothing more than abrasive, fast, and angry music — teen angst translated into volume — to do so is to dismiss its complex and challenging origin and misunderstand the role it played as the ambassador to financial disaster, representing the real human lives which the disaster deeply affected. The economy must be appreciated as more than the movement of money from hand to hand; it is also a deeply powerful force in the lives of human beings, with an almost godlike power to create or destroy, to give and to taketh away. And in the cases when the economy does the latter, those affected are bound to respond. Case in point: Punk.

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