Making Sense of Punk Subcultures in the Neoliberal United States

Summary

The punk phenomenon has been both widely praised and criticized. For some, it has been the ultimate expression of youthful anger and rebellion, especially in the 1980s when the United States was once again returning to a white heteronormative value system and mass consumerism. For others, it is evidence of a postmodern condition where any rebellion is systematically appropriated and pacified through the consumer market. Punk subculture(s) have also been widely criticized both for their inability to live up to self-proclaimed ideals of egalitarianism and for their failure to break away from the social norms structuring larger society. In this paper, I take the rise of hardcore punk subcultures in the early 1980s and the diversification of punk, such as Riot Grrrl and Queercore, in the 1990s as a broad historical framework, while analyzing punk discourses throughout punk history in the US. In providing a broader overview of debates in various disciplines this paper aims to address some of the concerns over issues of the “holy family” of social sciences in the US, namely those of gender/sexuality, race, and class, while situating them within a historico-political context. It also discusses the theoretical considerations of subcultural and popular culture studies by analyzing primary and secondary materials within and about punk subcultures. It is common to assume that subculture, by its very nature, implies exclusivity: who is excluded and why may vary, but exclusions remain prevalent. However, in the neoliberal and identity politics era, these exclusions became more subtle even if more frequently addressed. This paper suggests that punk subcultures can only be analyzed as contradictory: their attempts to create alternatives to the “mainstream” often reproduce similar exclusions concerning identity within a subculture, while their attempts to challenge social order are diffused by the capitalist appropriation of punk’s aesthetics and practices.

Keywords: punk, subculture, neoliberalism, Queercore, Riot Grrrl, identity politics.

Introduction

The genealogy of punk is debated and uncertain. Endless quarrels among historians and participants of punk have occurred over whether punk first originated in London or New York. In either case, what is significant is that punk emerged in major global cities at a time of economic uncertainty and the evaporating energy of the tumultuous era of the 1960s-1970s. Punk, in many ways emerged as a reaction to the increasing commercialization and conformism of rock ‘n’ roll that once defined the generational rebellion, as well as the rise of styles such as disco, which were
perceived as hedonistic and individualistic. By the late 1970s, most US major cities had thriving underground punk scenes. Some bands eventually became famous and were incorporated into the mainstream, while others remained “underground”, adhering to the oppositional and DIY ethos. Generally, it is considered that punk made its greatest impact within the history of pop culture during 1976-7 with the UK’s band Sex Pistols at the forefront of the media spectacle and the widespread youthful rebellion against societal norms. While many pronounced “classical” punk dead after 1977, punk continued in a variety of forms (Clark, 2003, p. 223) and hundreds of scenes throughout the world. What follows is a discussion about some of the developments and uneasy topics within the punk subcultures in the United States as it developed in reaction to, as well as shaped by the socioeconomic transformations of the last few decades.

**Marginality, race and contradictions of the “outside”**

Useful starting point to understand emergence of punk subculture in the US is through the concept of self-marginalization, as proposed by Daniel S. Traber (2001, p. 30). Self-marginalization refers to attempts of white Americans to escape their dominant identity by literally or symbolically aligning themselves with marginalized others, such as poor and/or racial minorities. The self-marginalization of privileged, largely white youth through style, attitude, anti-establishment rhetoric, and ideas of punk does not necessarily allow them “to leave behind structures of a society dominated by white men” (Butz, 2008, p. 154), but often reproduces them. Punk has a history of attempting to represent itself as a marginalized and oppressed minority that is as similarly situated as African Americans, for example. The documentary *Afro-Punk* starts with a quote from the song by Patti Smith called “Rock ‘n’ Roll Nigger” which states: “outside of society that is where I want to be.” The concept of self-marginalization, which might be limiting in its theoretical applicability, can still be useful in attempts to understand certain logics, that operate in relation to race, ethnicity, and social hierarchies within punk scenes. Traber (2001), discussing LA’s suburban-background punk scene and self-marginalization of the late 1970s and early 1980s, states:

> This subculture claims to desire dissonance and destabilization, but it depends on boundaries and regulatory fictions staying in place to define itself as oppositional. This does not mean that the subversive energy completely dissipates, but it cannot be theorized as a trouble-free dismantling of identity categories because it relies uncritically on the dominant for its difference and forces the subordinated into the role of being an alternative. Punks are actually uninterested in abolishing those restrictive lines of cultural and social demarcation, and any act of denaturalization in this gesture starts to appear accidental. Instead of tearing down the boundaries, they use them to sustain a false sense of autonomy – like those in the centre, without the Other they cease to exist (p. 32).
The economic context needs to be situated, although it is not sufficient in itself to
describe motivations to self-marginalize and rebel against the parents’ culture. Ac-
ccording to Osgerby (1999), punk was not a truly radical and “new” phenomenon, but
was a continuation of a variety of music styles as well as the establishment of the cat-
egory “teenager” within post WWII consumerism and technological developments
that gave rise to modern popular culture: “A mythologized version of American
adolescent life, ‘the teenager’ encapsulated the consumer society’s hedonistic fanta-
sies of unbridled leisure, pleasure and carefree fun – a set of images and stereotypes
that 70s punk both relished and lampooned” (p. 156). The “carefree” environment,
however, was changing by the 1970s. The late 1970s and especially early 1980s is
usually described as the period when neoliberalism rose to power in the US, as well
as the UK, China and other places (Harvey, 2005). Deindustrialization, the defeat in
Vietnam War, the energy crisis of 1973 and a variety of other economic and social
crises created a climate of economic stagnation or outright depression. The promise
of endless economic and social mobility and security was increasingly questioned.
With the election of Reagan in 1980, politics shifted towards free-market extrem-
ism and social conservatism that in part gave rise to emergence of punk subcultures
which then articulated themselves as oppositional. Yet to attribute the rise of punk
to economic anxieties alone would be gross overgeneralization. While punks came
from all ethnic and economic backgrounds, the scene was dominated by white sub-
urban and privileged youth that were in search of authenticity and an escape from
boredom. Moving to the inner cities and claiming the same space of marginaliza-
tion (as Others of the suburbs) was the ultimate act of rebellion and transgression
of American Dream. Traber (2001) states that “even as their parents fought battles
over taxes, property values, and neighbourhood boundaries to prevent the influx of
inner-city populations, this subgroup of youth (who were the public justification for
the parents’ politics) rejected the planned utopias to live among the very people the
folks back home claimed to be protecting them from” (p. 35). Although acknowl-
edging that there is a subversive potential in such rejection of parent values, Traber
(ibid) critiques the early LA punk scene for reinscribing and essentializing stere-
otypical identities of the inner city Other by romanticizing margins while simulta-
neously affirming white suburban identity as the centre (p. 49). Still, punk can be
read as merging critiques of suburban affluence and conformity with urban decay,
and economic decline, and capitalist restructuring more generally. Punk implicitly
or explicitly commented on whiteness and the “invisible” social order based on it,
even if it did not fully escape, the privileged position afforded by it.

A decade later, in a much more self-proclaimed “political” punk context, similar
ideas could be seen around the US. For example “A New Punk Manifesto”, published
in the Minneapolis anarcho-punk magazine Profane Existance, states: “As punks, we
reject our inherited race and class positions because we know they are bullshit. We want no part in oppressing others and we certainly want no part of Suburbia, our promised land.’ The rejection, while demonstrating agency, does not directly address freedom associated with choice and neither does it erase the history of class and race privilege. Punk attempts to reject privilege do not guarantee acceptance of socially and structurally marginalized people that do not have the choice (whether or not to be in a position of marginalization) in the first place. This can partially explain the predominance of white youth in the punk subculture as well as general scepticism of non-whites. The documentary *Afro-Punk* reveals that often African American youth start participating in punk because they live in predominantly white neighbourhoods or towns. It is another argument for middle-class background predominance within punk. “Diversity” as understood within the framework of liberal multiculturalism more often than not will disengage from issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality if there are a few visible Others in the group. And it tends to overlook its own and mainstream society’s structural and cultural racism. Nguyen (2000) articulates this position as follows: “do you read my presence as a reaffirmation (to your relief) of your punk rock (and Americanist) bootstrap ideology of exceptionalism and self-made individuals?” In this paper, though, the punk subculture will be described as *predominantly* white and middle-class although there is no empirical evidence to prove its real composition.

For some, punk becomes attractive because of its espoused egalitarianism and opposition to mainstream culture, ideals which for people of colour often turn out to be disappointing:

I know, I’ve been discriminated against because I look Asian and have darker skin, but again there is the skin colour hierarchy to consider – someone with the darker skin than mine could get treated shittier than me! I also wonder if some people ever see me and think that Asian = model minority, and if stereotypes are also applied to other minority punks. Racism is such a weird, incredibly stupid concept to me – I became so taken up by the notion that once being a punk among other punks made all of you equal to each other that the realization there was so much ignorance was infuriating!!

Another punk articulates what it means to be Black in the punk subculture:

I am ostracized by the black community and I am only partially accepted by the punk rock community as a token of punk’s “fight against racism.” Even other people of colour are more accepted in punk than blacks, simply because they are perceived as being “whiter”. Other people of colour don’t have a pre-defined style of music that they should listen to; therefore it is more believable that they could like punk. I am in no way saying that racism doesn’t exist for these people of colour in punk. I am simply saying that there is less of a musical stereotype for them, and that facilitates their acceptance.
The statement above illustrates how dominant ideas of racial hierarchies in a larger society operate similarly within the punk scenes. Black remains least assimilated, the exact opposite of white, merely as a token; others are judged through the skin tone hierarchy and degrees of assimilation for their acceptance and safe inclusion. The problem is clearly much more deeply ingrained in racial history of the US than the mere differences in musical taste stereotyping, as suggested by the statement above. The racism within a punk scene could be analyzed through the concept of abject. Abject implies simultaneous fascination with and fear of the Other. In the case of punk it helps to form a sense of self in relation to normative middle-class white identity without necessarily escaping the logic which constructs the social relations of domination and subordination in the first place. The US middle class, while inherently remaining workers, were able to reap dividends from white colonialist capitalist state project, especially since WWII. WWII allowed the US to rise as the world's hegemon and the Fordist model internally allowed for mass prosperity, which structurally, for the most part, excluded minorities. Most famously perhaps through suburbanization of the US, which stimulated economic growth and, once again, achieved de facto spatial segregation racially. Whiteness, then, is “not only a cultural collective identity, but a collective experience of structural advantage and state ‘assistance’ in a racially defined national terrain” (Chandan, Reddy, 1998, p. 338). Punk, while trying to disassociate from collective privilege of whiteness, at the same time is deeply embedded within histories and structures of whiteness, which remains powerful, if “invisible”, particularly in the United States.

Self-proclaimed rebellion and radical disengagement with everything that parent culture embodies is not necessarily achieved or achievable. Nguyen (2000) states “Punk rock proves to be as contentious a cultural, political and social sphere as any other, including a national one. As such, punk rock is not an exception to the rule, to the so-called ‘mainstream,’ and neither are punk rockers.”

In the 1984 issue of Maximumrocknroll one reader wrote: “Everybody wants to smash the system, but when it comes to trying to figure out a system to replace it, everyone's brain turns into oatmeal. Punks are quick to forget that their whole scene is just a cog in that fat, decadent, Free Enterprise machine.” It is apparent that while there were/are a variety of experiments in collective forms, networks, and cultural production, punk stayed at its best in the realm of performance and aesthetics. Doubtless, aesthetics can serve a significant role in various struggles for social change but in itself is a limited approach, as various avant-garde movements throughout the 20th century can attest. While some would argue that punk is defined

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1 In this paper I tend to focus on forms of punk that are considered to be rather “progressive," but punk, especially in its early stages, was equally signifying nihilism and disaffection without any pretense to be interested in affecting change.
more by attitude than by cultural production, overall, though, punk centres on mu-

cic, records, zines, etc. that always try to define themselves against mainstream. This 
aesthetic competition simultaneously pushes into obscurity and provides with raw 
materials for cooptation. On the other hand, punk does go beyond aesthetics in 
creating spaces for sociality, where diversity of ideas and actions materializes be-
yond music, texts, and images. It also attempts to establish various alternatives to 
capitalism by practicing DIY ethics, establishing alternative institutions opposed 
to corporate practices but, as Thompson (2004) suggests, “punk remains structured 
around a fundamental contradiction between an anticommercial impulse constitu-
tive of punk and punks’ necessary trafficking in the commodity market” (p. 81). 
Traber (2001), drawing on Duncambe, who discusses the 1990s zine scene, states 
that zine makers “form a network based on valorization of being ‘losers’, but the 
collective response to the systematic problems they critique becomes difficult since 
[they] are so preoccupied with avoiding co-optation that they descend further and 
further into cliques of obscurity” (p. 61).

Another angle to look at why punk scenes, especially in the 1980s, were so 
resistant to social diversity and difference, is punk’s attempts to create hegemony 
where white male hold power and status over physical and symbolic space of the 
subculture. This produces paradox, where white male power is presumably chal-
lenged by critiquing social norms and institutions dominated by the white men, 
while simultaneously seeking to establish and maintain white male power with-
in subcultures. On the one hand, this corresponds with search of “authenticity” 
that alienation of mass consumer market lacks. On the other hand, it becomes a 
reaction to real or anticipated decline in white male power in light of economic 
restructuring and partial social advancements of those previously marginalized. 
Various Others, then, serve the purpose to critique the status quo (which is evi-
dent in their lyrics and texts such as imperialism and racism), but it is preferred 
that actual Others would stay at the safe distance. Winnubst (2006) asks, more 
generally, “how does whiteness inhabit the body in such a way as to ensure that 
it transcends the body and becomes a ‘subject,’ while non-white bodies are fully 
reducible to the body and thus objects or abjected others?” (p. 16). The physical 
presence of “minorities” challenges safe self-marginalization and leads to exami-
nations of privilege and sharing the power of punk subculture’s discursive space. 
Self-righteousness and cliquishness, accompanied by (often) voluntary poverty or 
its imitations make punk subculture unattractive to people from minority groups. 
Stephanie, Asian-American punk, states:

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2 Chumbawamba’s album “Pictures of Starving Children Sell Records” could serve to illustrate the point. 
Many punk bands have critiqued charity rock concerts but the practice of using images of starving chil-
dren or war casualties has been some of the major tropes in punk aesthetics.
I agree that most punks are white and/or are socioeconomically somewhat well-off, because most youth who are not may see no benefit in joining a punk subculture that doesn’t seem to represent much that is relevant to their daily lives/concerns. To drive the point home, I’ve been asked by groups of young minority kids a couple times now what punk is about, “is it about _____? Why do you dress like that? etc.” and the way those questions were phrased made it implicit that they understood punk as something that was definitively not representative of them, but of ‘some other kind’ of people, and that was really interesting to me. To be a minority punk is also to risk more, as it can mean ostracization by family and peers that is sometimes greater than that faced by a punk who is white, as whiteness is still the dominant norm in society at-large (Visaip, 2005).

Contrary to the UK punk scene, which although at least in part was engineered by middle-class artists and entrepreneurs but picked up by predominantly urban working-class youth, the US punk scene emerged largely within the middle-class. The US youth’s motivation to join/form punk subculture was boredom and suburban homogeneity that did not allow self-expression and meaningful community. In that sense, it does not significantly depart from the liberal individualist ideology of their parents’ culture – punk became an escape route to partial autonomy rather than a social movement working towards transformation of society. In this respect there are differences and similarities to white youth movements of the 1960-1970s. They both could be seen as stemming from affluence and a critique of conformism and consumerism of the post-WWII United States. While punks often positioned themselves in opposition to both popular culture and earlier counterculture, the opposition was limited. It could be argued that white counterculture of the 1960-1970s was much more threatening and organized, even if much of it eventually dissolved into anti-social self-exploration and escapism.

Questions of cooptation and commercialization are similarly relevant to punk subculture as it was to earlier counterculture. According to Cross (2002) “the counterculturalist attack on conformity and celebration of expressive individualism did less to undermine the economic and social order than to provide a vocabulary for a distinct personal style of consumerism” and allowed the development of “consumer based on anticonformity” (p. 176). The rise of neoliberalism in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the US operated under similar logic of appropriating “cultural” expressions of dissent and turning them into profit. What has changed is that 1960s countercultures and social movements threatened with collective claims and political action, while the beginning of neoliberal era marked return to extreme forms of individualism and free market (for example, by blaming welfare recipients as being a cause rather than a consequence of particular social problems).

Cross (2002) also points out that counterculture, while less elitist then previous movements critical of pop culture, “openly, almost joyously, rejected working-class aspirations as materialistic and culturally repressive” (p. 166). Punks, it could
be argued, similarly rejected materialistic aspirations but appropriated elements of working-class aesthetics, particularly in terms of masculinity, also urges us to think how and why once iconic figures of a cultural phenomenon which embodied non-conformity and rebelliousness eventually become incorporated and even celebrated within the larger cultural sphere and collective psyche. For Traber, it is a proof how limited and individualistic nonconformity is and how it is deeply ingrained within dominant ideologies of whiteness and individualism Traber (2007, p. 135). The white rebel (since his identity is unmarked) becomes symbolic of universal human values and aspirations, while non-white rebels become associated with their (often prescribed) identity category. Winnubst (2006) uses the term “phallicized whiteness” to refer to “interlocking epistemological and political systems of domination functioning within late modern western cultures, particularly in their proclamations of freedom” (p. 10). “Phallicized whiteness” stems from the paradoxical ideals of western liberalism, where bodies are reduced to generic humans while simultaneously subjects are recognized and organized through difference. “The white male heterosexual body disavows its own corporeality – its own particularity and specificity – so that it can function as the universal signifier and appear as the controlled, contained body” (Winnubst, 2004, p. 42).

According to Clark (2003) ‘subculture’ is partly a response to prevailing political economies and partly a cultural pattern that has been shaped and reworked by subcultures themselves and by the mass media. As such it is an inherited social form, and one which is heavily interactive with capitalist enterprise” (p. 227).

**Queering subculture**

Although the US punk history had various stages and a diversity of expressions and scenes within it, the hardcore punk in the early late 1970s and early 1980s is often cited as particularly influential in turning the punk subculture into aggressive, hyper-masculine space. Various developments happened ever since, including non-white punk bands, Riot Grrrl and Queercore movements/scenes, that challenged the white heteromasculinity of punk. Leblanc (1999), though, states that “despite the continued development of punk, despite the subculture’s oppositional, reflexive symbols, rituals, norms, values, beliefs, and ideologies, despite the critique of a break-away faction (Riot Grrrl), at the beginning of its third decade of resistance, revolt, and refusal, punk remains a predominantly white, masculine youth subculture” (p. 64).³

³ Possible reasons for that are fleshed out throughout this paper. They could also include tradition of rock 'n' roll which has been dominated by men; punk aggressiveness and (historically) violence; punk as following tradition of gang model and various other subcultural sites of homosociality.
While such an assessment might be largely accurate the question remains why people decide to join punk or appropriate its particular forms for their own needs. There is evidence of punk self-reflexivity and self-criticism. For example, as early as 1978 in the UK, anarcho-punk band/collective CRASS was shouting “Punk is Dead!” while continuing to invent new forms and ideas within a largely punk framework. Similarly, in the US, bands such as Dead Kennedy’s were critical of “the system” as well as the punk scene’s narrow-mindedness. In the 1990s, bands such as A//Political in the US were stating: “Rebels in sheep’s clothing, what have you changed/External appearance and the world’s still the same” or “Reality check! Punk isn’t everything!/Punk is a ghetto/Revolutionize the world not just your scene”. The 1990s saw an emergence of the Riot Grrrl movement, which was connected to a larger punk movement but simultaneously autonomous. Riot Grrrl took on some of the punk’s basic features such as musical style, DIY aesthetics and practices of production and distribution, but also openly and directly challenged the punk scene’s (and society’s in general) sexism and homophobia taking on positions previously dominated by men. Riot Grrrl became a space for women’s self-expression and empowerment free of male judgment and standards, often combining punk with activist and academic feminisms. “Yet paradoxically these same safe spaces are vulnerable to class and race exclusions as the predominance of riot grrrl members [...] were middle-class and White” (Piano, 2003, p. 257). Another problem, that is important to every subculture, was capitalist appropriation and media-interests that simultaneously helped to popularize Riot Grrrl and defused/depoliticized some of its messages. Although Riot Grrrl challenged punk male dominance and created elaborate network of bands and zines, as well as actively took part in or organized protests and actions, just like other subcultures it did not significantly depart from American individualism and subcultural escapism discussed above. One of participants states: “In terms of Riot Grrrl, change really has to be looked at on a personal level. The revolutions are revolutions from within” (Rosenberg, Garofalo, 1998, p. 841). While the effects Riot Grrrl (or punk in general) had cannot be clearly assessed, as with other subcultures, Riot Grrrl was largely concerned with supporting and transforming its participants. Riot Grrrl is often seen as a significant element of the Third Wave feminism, which – while diverse in its approaches – is sometimes criticized for its lack of coherency and failure/unwillingness to become a political movement.

Punk’s relation to sexuality has a long history and diversity of interpretations. Nyong’ o (2008) states that “Punk may be literally impossible to imagine without gender and sexual dissidence” (p. 107). The basic starting point though could be that the word “punk” is in itself gendered and sexualized prison slang term for homosexual sex. Early punk fashion, particularly in the UK, often used variety of elements from BDSM, which suggested sexual underground and transgression. According to
Namaste (2000, p. 78) punk and its relationship to gender and sexuality in cultural studies has been analyzed in variety of, often contradictory, ways. Namaste divides the analyses into three main categories of 1) punk as asexual; 2) punk as sexually conservative; and 3) punk as a radical intervention into normative sexualities and sex/gender relations. “Non-normative sexualities and genders constituted an integral aspect of punk style and culture during their initial formation. If early punk culture encouraged the transgression of normative sexualities and sex/gender relations, if prostitutes and transsexuals were integral parts of punk networks, why do researchers in cultural studies refer to punk as a violent, masculinist world?” (Namaste, 2000, p. 85). Although punk subculture is often seen as rather sexually conservative others “have argued that the affinities between lesbian, feminist, trans, and gay people and the punk subculture was immediate, definitive, and far more enduring” (Nyong’o, 2008, p. 108). The 1970s had a much wider variety of punk stylistic and gender expressions, which dissolved and were overshadowed by LA’s and DC’s hardcore punk and their hypermasculinity. It is likely not a coincidence that the social and economic reforms as well as conservative social politics of Reagan resulted in diminishing of queer and women-led punk towards hypermasculine punk of the 1980s. Punk that was not “hardcore” brought associations with “softness” (emasculcation) of theatrical rock and failed rebelliousness of previous generation. However, since the mid-1980s there was a growing element within and outside punk known as queercore (as well as homocore, dykecore, etc.). According to DeChaine (1997), “queercore above all represents a confluence of punk rock music and queer politics” through empowerment and subversion achieved through play (p. 7–8). Ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions that often describe punk are also clearly characteristic of queercore. Fuchs (2005) states that the queercore “diverse ‘community’ whose markers of identity can be (deliberately) ambiguous as well as unmistakable, embracing a continuum of activism and incorporation, visibility and invisibility, private and public spheres, working against and through strictly oppositional structures” (p. 419). Halberstam (2005) argues that:

punk has always been stylized and ritualized language of the rejected; queer punk has surfaced in recent years as a potent critique of hetero- and homonormativity, and dyke punk in particular, by bands like Tribe 8 and The Haggard, inspires a reconsideration of the topic of subcultures in relation to queer cultural production and in opposition to notions of gay community (p. 153).

The question remains whether “punk” is affected by these interventions and to what extent. Do constant and ongoing subdivisions and subscenes reflect larger social and political movements based on identity? Who and how determines what constitutes “punk”? Is there one hegemonic punk scene and other subscenes that are less important or is the creation of the hegemonic punk scene, which might not exist
as such, a discursive formation? There has been dangerous and misleading media and academic hierarchy of subcultures and their meanings which placed “English punk near the top.” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 165). Ted Castle said in 1978 “The thing I really like about punk is that anything anybody writes about it is wrong” (quoted in Davies, 1996, p. 3). While such a claim might not be particularly productive, it should, nevertheless, be engaged with while doing research on punk subculture(s).

While it is clear that the 1970s British Cultural Studies approach to punk as ritualized working-class resistance to the status quo does not withstand close scrutiny on either side of the Atlantic, it could be still argued that punk’s anger, as one of the primary modes of expression, is an “essential political emotion” (Lyman (1980) quoted in Nehring, 1997, p. 107). Contrary to the masculine rationality and moderation (intellect versus emotion), punk provides a forum for new forms of politics and self-expression. Nehring argues that the combination of feminism, punk, and “anger at injustice” is exemplified by the Riot Grrrl movement. For example, one participant in Riot Grrrl stated: “It was also just about being freaks, being punk rockers, being people who are oppositional to the whole American system, and not wanting to look like adults and our parents who we saw fucking up the world” (Hex, 2000, p. 52). Although anger can be unifying and politically mobilizing it needs to be differentiated. For example, white male anger might stem not from the sense of injustice but from anxieties of losing status and privilege, while anger coming from people who are in some ways marginalized might be directed towards issues of social justice, claims to space and recognition.

Another problematic strand within subcultural and underground music studies is that of “culture industry” and co-optation. The studies and analysis inevitably reflect political and theoretical positions of the scholars. For example, while most studies are somewhat sympathetic there are voices that see youth subcultures as merely depoliticized distractions without potential. Langman (2008), discussing subcultures and body modification, states that:

in a most prescient warning, Marcuse (1964) suggested that oppositional subcultures and seeming erotic freedom may do little more than serve as ‘repressive desublimations’ that contain and neutralize discontent. Late capitalism could not only incorporate its own critique, but profit from that critique (p. 673).

Capital’s shift from Fordist industrial model to increasingly “immaterial” and cognitive regimes of production, paradoxically, benefited and continues to benefit from practices of social movements and subcultures by appropriating and incorporating into its operations “mobility, flexibility, knowledge, communication, cooperation, the affective” – features that became defining characteristics of late capitalism (Hardt, Negri, 2000, p. 275).
Discussion and conclusions

Even if punk – as well as queercore and Riot Grrrl – could be seen in some ways addressing issues of alienation and commodification by creating networks of cultural production, refusing to be incorporated in the capitalist music industry and using a variety of DIY ethical practices, the political economy, in a traditional Marxist sense, is rarely addressed within subcultures as well as in the recent scholarship. The questions of co-optation and resistance are often central to an anti-capitalist stance which should be seen as clearly limiting. Subcultures can easily be accommodated within capitalist production and never fully contained in the “underground.” Subcultures, by pushing the boundaries of cultural production and experimentation, constantly open up new frontiers for capitalist appropriation. The more postmodern/poststructural scholars, as well as subcultural participants that articulate themselves within the framework of poststructuralism, argue that subcultural spaces are positive alternatives to structuralist, usually Marxist, calls for revolutionary changes in the society at large. While there are some merits on both (or many additional) approaches that are taken in understanding subcultures, historically it is quite evident that subcultural politics are clearly limited in challenging capitalism in any serious way. Despite the obvious pattern of cooption, cultural and artistic expressions that do not threaten to organize and get rid of the logic and institutions of domination remain serving the historical function of carnival in the Bakhtinian sense. “Carnival offered an escape from societal norms of behaviour, it was also sanctioned by those in power. It was regarded as a kind of cultural pressure valve – a way of regulating normativity by allowing it to periodically run loose in a ritual form” (DeChaine, 1997, p. 13). This should not negate the experiences and personal transformations that occur within subcultural spaces, as well as the intended or unintended effects they (can) have on the outside. It also should not suggest that there are neat separate categories of politics, economy, and culture. It is important to explicitly recognize “the profound economic power of the cultural movements, or really the increasing indistinguishability of economic and cultural phenomenon” which allows not only new regimes of production but also “production of subjectivity” (Hardt, Negri, 2000, p. 275).

Subcultures also share some similarities as well as differences with identity politics in general. Much of social theory and political thought in general is preoccupied with the dilemmas of freedom, individual liberty and collective or social obligation and limits (agent-structure problem in sociology, for example). The dominant ideology in the US has been to privilege individual, as opposed to collective, rights. Subcultures can be seen as one of the ways to deal with this particular tension. Subcultures often allow one to find a community as well as express individuality. However
both of these premises are clearly problematic. As discussed earlier, community often becomes quite homogenous, by excluding non-dominant identities, and individual expressions, as defined against the overarching “mass” of mainstream society, get confined within the subcultural limits. The sentiment expressed by “ex-punk” illustrates the point:

When I grew tired of trying to outdude everyone, I wanted to be real with people, but didn't feel the 'real' me would be valued as much. This may have been in part because our scene was almost entirely white and devalued the priorities and cultures of people of colour while claiming to ‘smash racism’ (King, 2008).

Others however have different interpretations and experiences, although it could be explained by gender and other identity markers. Bad Brains, who are African American, became probably one of the most famous and influential hardcore punk bands of all times. However, they refused to participate in the documentary Afro-Punk as well as in the larger Afro-Punk movement on the basis that punk is simply universal youth expression: “I don't endorse shit like Afro-Punk or Black Rock Coalition; they know that I have never really been into nothing like that because I'm into the youth, all kids, everybody” (Jenifer, 2007). This could be examined as in part expressions of American individualism as well as masculinity, since women would be less likely to express sentiment of youth universality within punk. DJ also points out (this time acknowledging race as a factor) the possibilities of unintended effects: “Mike D wants to put on a Volkswagen chain, you can bet that 'If the Bad Brains played punk, I can rap' was in a subliminal place. That happens all over, and it spreads like wildfire. People started to do whatever they wanted” (ibid).

To conclude, what emerges is that there is a variety of contradictions and contestations internal to subcultures, as well in the scholarship on subcultures. Popular culture, which subcultures are or inevitably become part of, can be historicized. Forms of popular culture are always rooted in particular economic, social and political regimes. The attempts to escape the dominant culture are always only partial and so are ways to resist and/or challenge it from within subcultural spaces. Subcultural spaces, in this case broadly defined as punk, while reproducing mainstream society’s social norms and practices are also able to change, adapt, or diversify. The scholars and critics that fail to see any potential or acknowledge particular forms, ideas, and practices that emerge from subcultural spaces operate as elitist judges that have little respect or interest in human agency and possibilities for change. On the other hand, those who merely celebrate subcultures as the true alternative to society’s social problems often inevitably reproduce the status quo and capitalist logic that is able to happily coexist with variable, and even the most oppositional, subcultures.
References


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Sources


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Santrauka


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