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Taking a Hard Left: Civic Learning, Radical Politics, and Hardcore Punk in the 1980s

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This article examines the political dimensions of the art, literature, “zines,” music, and activism of the American punk movement in the 1980s. The scene was dominated by far-Left views, which were both taught and learned and, thus, served as an informal civic education for many young people in the subculture.

Keywords: Civic education, anarchism, punk rock, popular culture

In the 1980s, teenagers and young adults in the United States created a new punk movement—often referred to as American hardcore—that attempted to challenge the cultural conservatism and neoliberalism that gained traction in the late 1970s. The punk scene of the 1980s—comprised of musicians, artists, writers, and a multitude of young activists—was intensely political and, unlike the nihilism and hedonism of the older generation of punks in the 1970s, looked to anarchists and other radical political theorists for inspiration. This shift toward radicalism in the 1980s did not only target American conservatism; this political turn also was a *hard left* that took aim at mainstream liberals who, many radical punks believed, merely tinkered around the edges of the status quo and offered no real liberation for the oppressed (Mattson, 2020; Blush, 2010). In 1982, for example, Peter Urban, a writer in the punk scene, commented on punk’s radical roots when reflecting on the community’s support for and participation in the so-called “White Night riots”—demonstrations against the lenient sentence for the murderer of the gay political leader Harvey Milk—a few years earlier: “We were communists, socialists, situationalists, anarchists. We were a threat” (Urban, 1982, p. 14).*

This new punk movement that coalesced in the 1980s provided many young people in America with a civic education, an education in which teenagers and young adults *learned* the tenets of radical politics. This exploration of the ways in which learning occurs outside of formal educational institutions addresses Bernard Bailyn (1972) and Lawrence Cremin’s (1970, 1988) decades-old critique of the history of education’s parochial focus on schooling (Gaither, 2003)—a call to arms in the field that subsequently has been taken up by several educational historians (e.g., Fass, 2007; Lauzon, 2010; Lauzon, 2011; Ramsey, 2015; Warren, 2005)—by examining the political and educational dimensions of the art, literature, films, “zines,” and, most importantly, music of the punk scene. As the folk musician and labor hero Joe Hill wrote over a century ago: “A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over” (Hill, 1914/2015). Many of the punk songs of the 1980s were inundated with radical messages, and, like the labor songs from earlier generations, were repeated over and over by the young people who learned their revolutionary ideas, such as M.D.C.’s critique of schooling in “Church and State”: “Nationalism in school, perpetrating their rule / Lying

* Early issues of *Maximum Rocknroll* were not paginated, but I have included page numbers when referencing the magazine (page one being the cover) to better inform the reader.

textbooks rant their patriotic slant / ‘Your country’s great,’ cry the church and state” (M.D.C., 1982).

PUNK TURNS LEFT

The “first wave” of punk in the United States emerged in the mid-1970s, having adopted the fast and stripped-down musical style of the proto-punk and garage rock bands of the late 1960s, notably the Michigan-based bands the MC5 and the Stooges. The pioneering punk bands of the 1970s, such as the Ramones and X, explored the dark underbelly of American life—what John Doe of X called the “realistic side”—and often had an anti-establishment message that resonated with angsty teenagers (Spheeris, 1981; Stalcup, 2001). In 1977, for instance, the Ramones released “Gimme Gimme Shock Treatment” on their second album *Leave Home*; Joey Ramone sang: “I was feeling sick, losing my mind / Heard about these treatments by a good friend of mine / He was always happy, smile on his face / He said he had a great time at the place / Peace and love is here to stay and now I can wake up and face the day / Happy-happy-happy all the time, shock treatment, I’m doing fine” (Ramones, 1977). Three years later, X—a Los Angeles-based punk band formed in the 1970s that occasionally shared a drummer with the Germs—released the punk classic “Nausea” on which the female vocalist Exene Cervenka screamed: “Today, you’re gonna be so sick, so sick / You’ll prop your forehead on the sink / . . . For lunch, that’s all you get to taste / Poverty and spit / . . . Bloody red eyes go to nausea / Bloody red eyes go to sleep” (X, 1980).

As rebellious as many of the 1970s punk bands in the U.S. were, most were not overtly political (unlike some of their contemporaries in the U.K., especially the Clash). In the documentary film *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981), for instance, the Germs—especially the band’s lead singer Darby Crash—appeared brazenly anti-intellectual, preferring instead the nihilistic bliss of drugs, alcohol, and self-mutilation to thoughtful engagement. Without a strong political ideology, this first wave of punk was not a serious threat to the social mainstream because, record companies believed, it could be tamed or monetized (or both). Many of the leading bands had contracts with major record labels, and the punk “look” was sold as the latest fashion trend. Some of bands in the early punk scene, such as Blondie and the Go-Go’s, were encouraged to smooth out the rough edges of their sound and were repackaged as “new wave” or pop groups that had a much broader commercial appeal. Thus, by the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, this apolitical and re-envisioned first wave of U.S. punk—i.e., “new wave”—had been co-opted by the corporate music industry and easily fit into the “sex, drugs, and rock and roll” hedonism that marked the arena rock of the same period (Spheeris, 1981; Mattson, 2020; Stalcup, 2001).

The first wave of punk peaked at a time in which the nation was beginning to shift to the political Right. Nothing symbolized this rightward turn more than the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the political leader who championed the conservatives’ call to rein in the supposed liberal excesses of the 1960s and early 1970s. In his inaugural address, Reagan famously stated that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem,” an allusion to his neoliberal agenda that, as he noted in another address, would undo the “punitive tax policies and excessive and unnecessary regulations” placed on the corporate sector (Reagan, 1989, pp. 61, 79). At the Conservative Political Action Conference in 1981, Reagan again stated his neoliberal agenda by noting how intellectuals like Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman “shaped” his thoughts. At the same conference, he also hinted at his intent to intensify the Cold War and to promote an evangelical Christian worldview in the nation. In Reagan’s mind, the two were interconnected since the Communist nations held onto a “Marxist vision” that was a “false faith”

and, thus, should be combatted. “Evil,” Reagan asserted, “is powerless if the good are unafraid” (Reagan, 1989, pp. 96-99).

The new punk movement that started to emerge in the United States during the tail end of the 1970s and early 1980s partially drew musical inspiration from the first wave in the mid-1970s, but, unlike the more apolitical older generation, became politically radicalized in opposition to Reagan’s America. The opposition to Reagan and his policies even was reflected in some of the bands’ names; Jodie Foster’s Army (J.F.A.), for instance, was a wink and a nod to the disturbed John Hinkley, Jr., who shot Reagan in 1981 in an attempt, he stated, to impress Foster. The radicalized punks of the 1980s—“teeny punks,” as they were derogatorily called—tended to be younger than their predecessors, often teenagers in high school or young adults in college (Mattson, 2020). The younger age of the second-generation punks was partially due to the popularity of skateboarding among teenagers in the 1980s. Skate zines, notably *Thrasher Magazine*, regularly promoted punk bands; in the August 1984 issue of *Thrasher*—largely devoted to “skate rock”—the magazine published a laudatory review of a recent show featuring the Faction, the Big Boys, and Jodie Foster’s Army and included a lengthy interview with J.F.A. (Johnson, 1984). Because of their relative youth, inexperience, and political radicalism, bands that were part of this new movement initially had difficulty booking shows at the venues that their elders had played and, thus, were relegated to small clubs. The “teeny punks” also were unable to garner the attention of major labels. In fact, no band of this generation had a record deal with a major label until the Replacements and Hüsker Dü received offers in the mid- to late 1980s. Additionally, there had long been a semi-substantiated rumor that President Carter requested that the music industry leaders shun the newer punk bands for fear that they might radicalize the young people and create a revolutionary climate akin to the 1960s (Mattson, 2020; Stalcup, 2001).

Yet, without pressure from adults trying to direct their artistic endeavors (large venue owners, record company executives, etc.), these young punks created their own unique sound; the musical style was much rawer and faster than earlier incarnations of punk and came to be referred to as American hardcore (“hardcore” punk was a term first used by the Canadian band D.O.A. that regularly toured in the U.S.). Without the assistance from adults, they also developed their own movement, adopting what is now referred to as a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic. In fact, “do-it-yourself” was a common phrase in the anarchist literature of the 1970s and 1980s, the literature from which the newer punks drew inspiration (Ward, 1973/2018, pp. 25, 106; Mattson, 2020). The musicians booked their own gigs (sometimes at house parties) and set up their own tours. Shawn Stern from the band Youth Brigade founded the Better Youth Organization (BYO) to establish a touring network across the U.S and Canada: “Then bands can travel around the country, can find a BYO or similar organization, who would put them up, get them gigs. . . . The whole purpose of this is [. . . that] the kids make the music, the kids come to shows, so the kids should do it all on their own” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 21). Using that network of young punks throughout North America, Youth Brigade and Social Distortion—most of the members of the two bands were teenagers—organized a five-week tour in the U.S. and Canada in an old school bus during the summer of 1982 (Mattson, 2020; Stalcup, 2001; Blush, 2010; D.O.A., 1981; Small & Stuart, 1984).

As part of this DIY movement, the second generation of punks also formed its own independent record companies. Members of the Dead Kennedys (DK), Black Flag, and Minor Threat formed Alternative Tentacles, SST Records, and Discord Records, respectively, and signed numerous other bands to these independent record labels (including D.O.A.). In the Northwest, members of Beat Happening started K Records, and affiliates of the label later began Sup Pop Records. In addition to the musicians, the artists, writers, and activists in the punk scene created a multitude of

“zines” to publish their work. The leading national publication in the U.S. was *Maximum Rocknroll*, but a multitude of other—often smaller—zines covered the music, art, and ideas in local scenes. After working with other publications, for example, the artist Matt Groening became the editor of *L.A. Reader*, which featured his cartoon series “Life in Hell” and his essays on the world of punk art (Mattson, 2020; Blush, 2010; Baumgarten, 2012; Turcotte & Miller, 1999; *Maximum Rocknroll*, 1982).

The American hardcore movement was much more political than the punk scene of the 1970s. Much of the messaging in punk lyrics was anti-establishment, directed at the authority figures with whom young people had the most experience: parents, teachers, and police. Because punk was a relatively new, adults often had trouble accepting the ideas and personal expression of these young people, so much so that punks occasionally were kicked out of their parents’ houses and regularly were harassed and abused by the police. Many of these authority figures also were assumed to be Reaganites. In 1983, Social Distortion—a band from Orange County, California, a mecca for Reaganism—released *Mommy’s Little Monster*; on the title track, Mike Ness sang that mommy’s little monster “doesn’t wanna be a doctor / Or a lawyer, get fat and rich . . . / His brothers and sisters / Have tasted sweet success / His parents condemn him / Say, ‘His life’s a mess’” (Small & Stuart, 1984; Social Distortion, 1983). Raymond Pettibon, perhaps the best-know artist of the punk scene and architect of Black Flag’s logo, produced a flyer for a Circle Jerks show that depicted a teenager’s empty bedroom with an open window (the youngster had escaped); the tagline of the flyer artwork stated: “THE LONG NIGHTMARE IS OVER” (Turcotte & Miller, 1999, p. 95). The front cover artwork on M.D.C.’s *Millions of Dead Cops*—the band’s initials stood for different things over time, including Multi-Death Corporation—showed a line of cops in riot gear, while the back cover depicted a police officer whose other half was a Klansman pointing a revolver at the viewer (M.D.C., 1982).

In addition to being the authority figures within the family and community, as well as followers of Reagan’s policies, parents of punks in the 1980s—particularly liberal parents—often were symbols for the hedonistic counterculture of the 1960s, which many in the American hardcore community critiqued. Minor Threat, a D.C.-based band, set in motion an anti-drug, alcohol, and promiscuous sex movement with its songs like “Straight Edge” and “Bottled Violence,” a movement that was partially a rejection of the excesses of the hippies and their children who adhered to the same hedonistic lifestyle. In 1982, Ian MacKaye, the band’s frontman, noted that the straight-edge movement was “an alternative” to the culture of sex, drugs, and mindless violence in America, stating that having one’s “head straight” was an intellectual “advantage” (Minor Threat, 1984; Small & Stuart, 1984; Mattson, 2020). Pettibon regularly critiqued the hippies by producing black humor art that depicted Charles Manson and his “family,” perhaps the ugliest side of the 1960s counterculture (Turcotte & Miller, 1999, pp. 88-95). In 1980, the seminal punk band Dead Kennedys went so far as to argue, in a tongue-and-cheek manner, that the hippies who turned into mainstream liberals were positing a new form of tyranny. The DK frontman, Jello Biafra, sang: “Zen fascists will control you / 100% natural / You will jog for the master race / And always wear a happy face . . . / The hippies won’t come back you say / Mellow out or you will pay / California Über Alles” (Dead Kennedys, 1980).*

* For the modern reader, this rejection of New Age liberalism might sound like the reactionary politics of the current far Right, akin to Representative Marjorie Taylor Green’s comparison of public health mandates to the indignities suffered by the victims of the Holocaust. However, there are important distinctions. The members of the Dead Kennedys were young musicians not members of the House of Representatives. Also, like many of DK’s songs, “California Über Alles” was partially in jest—hyperbole used to point to an issue in a jocular way. Young punks in

Beyond the parochial anti-authority themes within the American hardcore movement, punks in the 1980s also developed a broader social critique and political agenda, initially tackling issues that directly impacted young people; as Shawn Stern from Youth Brigade noted in 1982, American hardcore was “music by kids, for kids, reflecting the frustrations and problems that kids face every day” (Small & Stuart, 1984). Beginning during the Carter Administration and reaffirmed during Reagan’s years, for instance, the federal government reinstated the Selective Service System, and, thus, the possibility of being drafted into Reagan’s not-so Cold War emerged as a central theme of the punk movement. In 1985, the Dirty Rotten Imbeciles (D.R.I.) captured this sentiment with the song “I Don’t Need Society,” which stated: “Your number’s up you have to go / The system say’s ‘I told you so’ / Stocked in a train like a truckload of cattle / Sent off to slaughter in a useless battle / Thousands of us sent off to die / Never really knowing why / Fuck the system they can have me / I don’t need society!” (D.R.I., 1985). As Reagan began to intervene in Central America—driven by a fear that Nicaragua could become the next Cuba—the punk movement joined with other peace activists in the U.S. to protest military involvement. Chicago-based Naked Raygun captured this growing concern on its debut album in 1985 by repeating the only verse (no chorus) throughout the song “Managua”: “Gee whiz / Pretty pretty boys / Pretty pretty boys / Onward to Managua” (Naked Raygun, 1985; Mattson, 2020).

As part of the punk movement’s broader critique of foreign and domestic policy, many young people in the scene came to identify with the tenets of anarchism and other radical political theories. Pettibon, for instance, was an ardent anarchist (Mattson, 2020, p. 21). Yet, the anarchism of the American hardcore movement was not the do-as-you-please “disorder” (as Peter Kropotkin (2002) called it in the nineteenth century) of the Sex Pistols in the mid-1970s (p. 61); it had roots in the thoughtful political theory of Michael Bakunin. Bakunin (1866/2002) noted in his 1866 “Revolutionary Catechism” that the goal of anarchism was “*freedom for all, for individuals as well as collective bodies*” (p. 96). Since oppression and exploitation naturally infringed upon freedom, “*political equality . . . [,] economic equality [, and] equality . . . [of] social rights*” were essential conditions in achieving that freedom (p. 97). Anarchism in this sense, as Kropotkin (2002) noted, was “collectivist,” essentially a “no-government system of socialism” (pp. 46, 295). “[S]olidarity” collectivity, and “mutual aid” formed the backbone of anarchism’s organizational structure, a structure to ensure equality and freedom (Kropotkin 2002; Jagusch 2021). In his popular book, *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, James C. Scott (2012) highlighted the everyday disruptive and anarchist actions not only of political protests and revolutionary movements but also of ordinary people rejecting oppression of various sorts. The activities, both big and small, of the punk movement in the 1980s almost perfectly captured the essence of the anarchist resistance and collective action that Scott so powerfully described.

Of course, not all musicians, artists, and activists within the punk movement were anarchists. Some, for example, were socialists and communists. Mike Watt from the working-class band, the Minutemen, was attracted to democratic socialism, while the frontman for the Proletariat was a devoted communist. Yet, many in the movement were as “suspicious,” as the historian Kevin Mattson (2020) noted, “of totalitarianism on the left” as they were of fascism on the right (pp. 21, 163). This potential for totalitarianism was keeping in line with the anarchism of Bakunin. In 1873, Bakunin (1873/2002) famously critiqued the “fiction” of Marxism’s dictatorship of the proletariat by noting that the “differences between revolutionary dictatorship and statism are superficial” because “former workers, who, as soon as they become the rulers of the representatives of the

the 1980s rejected many aspects of their parents’ hippie culture, which, in their view, had become politically dogmatic, mystical, and hedonistic.

people, will cease to be workers and will look down at the plain working masses from the governing heights of the State; they will no longer represent the people, but only themselves and their claims to rulership over the people” (pp. 328-331). Of course, Bakunin statement turned out to be quite prescient with regard to the leadership in many Communist nations, as the punks in the 1980s fully understood.

In addition to those on the political Left, others in the punk scene were nihilists or essentially apolitical. More concerning were those who were reactionary, such as the Michigan-based band the Meatmen with particularly offensive lyrics (that were supposed to be humorous) in songs like “Tooling for Anus” and “Crippled Children Suck” (Meatmen, 1983). The legendary editor of *Maximum Rockroll*, Tim Yohannan (Tim Yo) commented on such songs. “I’m not against humorous punk songs, but all too often the targets of that ‘humor’ seems to be the people in life who’ve already gotten the shittiest hands dealt out by fate. That’s too easy” (*Maximum Rockroll*, 1983a, p. 8). As offensive as some of the bands were, none were as politically reactionary as the growing number of skinheads that began to join the scene by the early to mid-1980s (Mattson, 2020). In 1982, the editors of *Maximum Rockroll* chastised the reactionary currents in some circles, noting: “If punk is to be a threat, different from society, then any so-called punk who flirts with racism and sexism, proudly displays ignorance, resorts to physical violence and is afraid of knowledge or political action, is not a threat at all, but has gone over to the enemy” (*Maximum Rockroll*, 1982, p. 3). A year earlier, the Dead Kennedys were even more forceful in their rebuke of the violent and reactionary members of the scene, noting “If you’ve come to fight, get outta here / You ain’t no better than the bouncers / We ain’t trying to be police / When you ape the cops it ain’t anarchy / Nazi punks / Nazi punks / Nazi punks, fuck off!” (Dead Kennedys, 1981).

Although there were a multitude of political perspectives within American hardcore, the overarching ethos of the movement was a mixture of anarchism (Jagusich, 2021) and what historian Mattson called “the politics of provocation,” the utilization of “black humor” to elicit shock in a way that demonstrated the absurdity of right-wing and center-left policies (Mattson, 2020, p. 15). This anarcho-provocation ethos especially manifested itself with regard to America’s emerging neoliberal agenda. As noted earlier, the new generation of punks were shunned by the corporate record industry, prompting a DIY movement that aligned with anarchism’s anti-capitalist collectivism. Musicians and artists who expected substantial material rewards (beyond subsistence) were considered sell-outs. The Dead Kennedys parodied those musicians in their song “Pull My Strings.” “I’m tired of self-respect,” Biafra sang, “I can’t afford a car / I want to be a prefab superstar / I want to be a tool / Don’t need no soul / Want to make big money / Playing rock and roll” (Dead Kennedys, 1987). John Shirley, a member of the San Francisco punk scene published his “cyberpunk” *City Come A-Walkin’* in 1980, a novel that railed against corporate control and corruption in the not-so-distant future (actually set in the 1990s). One of the central characters, Catz, came to realize that the government and corporations were working hand-in-hand to pacify the masses, stating “Mass uniformity as a by-product of consumer conditioning. It’s the subtle propaganda of the corporations, the special interests that run everything with their condescendingly benign, soft, liberal-smiling efficiency.” She noted that the consumerism and uniformity in 1990s America “helps them suppress us, maybe—like methadone, and the government-issue smack” (Shirley, 1980, p. 134).

The anarcho-provocation of the hardcore scene was not only used to critique the social conservatism and neoliberalism of Reagan’s America; it also took aim at mainstream liberals and progressives, thus demonstrating the punk movement’s *hard left* turn the 1980s. For example, the Democratic governor of California, Jerry Brown—who was supported by progressives like

Cesar Chavez—was, for the radicalized punks, no ally; liberals like Brown were part of the establishment with which the punks were, metaphorically, at war. Much of Jello Biafra’s black-humored criticism of hippies-turned-liberals in “California Über Alles” was directed at Jerry Brown. Imagining a comically liberal fascism, Biafra sang: “I am Governor Jerry Brown / My aura smiles and never frowns / Soon I will be president... / Carter power will soon go away / I will be Führer one day / I will command all of you / Your kids will meditate in school” (Dead Kennedys, 1980). The Dead Kennedys also poked fun at newly enlightened college students for their superficial liberal views. In “Holiday in Cambodia,” Biafra noted:

So you been to school for a year or two
 And you know you’ve seen it all
 In daddy’s car, thinkin’ you’ll go far
 Back east your type don’t crawl

Play ethnicky jazz to parade your snazz
 On your five grand stereo
 Braggin’ that you know how the [n-words] feel cold
 And the slum’s got so much soul

It’s time to taste what you most fear
 Right Guard will not help you here
 Brace yourself, my dear...

It’s a holiday in Cambodia
 It’s tough, kid, but it’s life (Dead Kennedys, 1980).

Biafra’s criticism of the young liberals was twofold. Despite now having a shallow appreciation for some aspects of African American culture, such as jazz, they continued to have a derogatory view of the oppressed, hence the *college students’* use of the n-word. (The point of view of the n-word in this song was not from the Dead Kennedys.) Additionally, there was no action tied to the young liberals’ enlightenment. They kept their same bourgeois lifestyle despite, presumably, knowing about America’s inequities; the liberals brushed those away by stating “the slum’s got so much soul.” Thus, Biafra’s comic recommendation for them was to take “a holiday in Cambodia” to really feel suffering.

LEARNING THE LEFT

Young people in the United States did not just passively listen to, read, and view the radical sentiments of punk musicians, writers, and artists; they *learned* these ideas and ideals and actively participated in the political aspects of the movement. For example, thousands of young people attended the Rock Against Reagan events, a joint effort between the remnants of the Youth International Party (Yippies) and the burgeoning American hardcore scene (Mattson, 2020, pp. 150-153). Punks were encouraged to learn and develop their political consciousness. Stern, for example, urged Youth Brigade fans to “educate yourself. Ignorance is your worst enemy. [I]f you can get something out of school, go ahead. I, myself, can. . . . Read books, read everything you can” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 20). *Maximum Rocknroll’s* Tim Yo—who was much older

than most punks, having been part of the radical left in the 1960s—mentored punks by thoughtfully responding to letters from the magazine’s younger readers. Marcel, a thirteen-year-old from Wisconsin (and “8th grade class president”), noted: “What I’m writing to you about is the concept of anarchy. Personally, I think it’s a good idea, but it would never work because there’s always someone who’s going to fuck someone else over, and how are you going to be rid of violence.” Yo responded: “Dear Marcel, Glad to see young ‘uns like yourself out there thinking about things. As to your points about anarchy—it is hard to imagine our fucked up society suddenly becoming supportable of an idealistic set-up like that. Change takes a long time, and anarchy won’t work until most people are ready to accept responsibility for the world” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, pp. 6-7; Mattson, 2020).

Many punks explicitly acknowledged that they were educated by the scene, especially through the bands and zines. In 1982, for instance, Lynn and Michelle wrote a joint letter to *Maximum Rocknroll* in which they critiqued the façade of representative government in the U.S. and directly connected that critique to particular lyrics. They noted that America “[i]s a fucking oligarchy run by a few corporate executives who can pump billions of dollars into Capitol Hill and get anything they want accomplished. Their goal is profit; they could not give a damn about the people. They want a war in order to fill their pockets. The DK’s song on the *Wargasm* LP is scary because it is true. Everything Jello says can happen NOW” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1982, p. 5). John from Chicago noted that “M.D.C. played here in April, and before they went on the singer talked about the problems and troubles we face here in America, and why we should rock against Reagan.” Although some in the audience did not appreciate the political oration—they wanted the band to play—John did. He stated, “I really do hope it [the hardcore scene] encourages people to care about one another, and to see beyond the walls and boundaries society builds around us. . . . [When I am older] I may give up on punk music, but the ideas I will always treasure and pass on” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 7). One teenager noted in *Maximum Rocknroll* “It’s good to have a mag that deals not only with the music side of punk, but the social, economic, and political sides. Even thought [sic] I’m only 16, I’m interested in this part of life, probably because they’re the parts that suck the most” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 6).

In the 1980s, punks demonstrated their learning of the tenets of radicalism in letters written to hardcore zines and when they were interviewed by documentarians. Many, like the movement as a whole, railed against the institutions and authority figures they knew best. Mark, clearly a high school student, voiced his disdain for the school system in a letter to *Maximum Rocknroll*, a letter that paralleled the themes of M.D.C.’s (1982) “Church and State” (which was released a few months before Mark’s letter), as well as the then-popular anarchist writer Colin Ward’s (1973/2018) work on schooling, which was widely read by punks (Mattson, 2020):

I’m grounded, being held prisoner at home, so your mag is one of the few things I look forward to. No shows, no parties, no nothing cos I didn’t kiss ass to my fascist Biology teacher. The whole fuckin school system operates on fear. . . . They get you to kiss their ass by saying good grades will make you a leader or some fuckin money hungry professional or at least a no name in the working class. But if you fuck up then you are doomed to be a slave of poverty. Learning about what’s really going on around you and being an open minded individual is not what they’re concerned about; they just want to keep you quiet and obedient. Since authority in school is maintained by those outside your family (whose authority you mostly accept since it’s been exercised since birth), the teacher, who you don’t know personally, is training you to respect an authority which is

totally a stranger to you: the fucking government. That's why we have student body governments, to get us ready for the fact that our equals, even basically equal in age, will be our masters. This democracy bullshit is based on majority rule and majority consent which means minority slaves and minority dependence on decisions made from "up there". [sic] Our learning process not only prepares us for this shit, but we have no vote and this fucking school system exists without any of our consent. Sure, you can always quit school, but how easy [is it] to find a job without a piece of paper saying you've passed government standards? But hey! You can always join the Army! (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1982, p. 4).

Like Mark who was "being held prisoner" by his parents, many young punks resented or sometimes challenged the authority of their relatives. Even simply "looking" punk—the clothing, hairstyles, etc.—was perceived by some parents as a threat or rebuke. Roxie, for example, did not want to look like the "all-American girl," and Jim refused to dress like a "capitalist tool"; their veering from the mainstream norms—even in such superficial ways as dress—was quite unsettling to their parents (Small & Stuart, 1984). That perceived "threat" to parental authority sometimes resulted in punks being kicked out of the family home. One teenager noted that "I was told another of the many times to get the fuck out of the house. Then when I am ready to leave they say, 'Where do you think you're going?' And you remind them that they told you to fuck off and say, 'If you leave, we're calling the police and you'll be in Juvenile Hall.' So what the fuck. They're assholes. They say Punk has done it all" (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 6; Small & Stuart, 1984). As with teachers and parents, the police were adults whose authority was resisted and challenged, often with good reason. Akin to the late 1960s and early 1970s when cops would harass or abuse young people with long hair, in the 1980s officers would regularly target punks and skateboarders. As one punk stated, many cities had "a problem with police harassment," in which shows were arbitrarily shut down or punks were hassled for simply being punks. As such the police were frequently thought of as enemies and fascists (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983b, p. 9; Small & Stuart, 1984; Mattson, 2020).

In addition to their anti-authority stance regarding teachers, parents, and police officers, many young punks directed their social and political critiques at larger inequities and injustices, thus demonstrating their newly radicalized awareness of national and international issues. Of course, war and capitalism were frequent targets of young people's contempt. In 1983, Rob noted that he recently became involved with a group called "Hardcores Against The U.S. In El Salvador," his initial foray into the anti-war movement. He also recommended a "[t]ax revolt" to contest warmongering and neoliberal policies since "50% of our taxes finance the defense, in it's [sic] quest to end life as we know it. Part of the other 50% goes to finance corporate bailouts and the pollution of our planet. . . . A carefully orchestrated effort to educate people about precisely where their tax dollars are going (corporate death state), along with some very famous people willing to be tax martyrs would be a start." The "payoff," Rob stated, "could be a dismantling of the 'machine' It cannot function without financing" (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 5).^{*} Yet, these views were so widely shared in the punk community that they had become clichés, according to one letter writer in *Maximum Rocknroll*. Steve noted, "Anti-Reagan, nuclear war, and racism songs are all cheap, safe protest songs." Although he argued that with such "safe" protest songs

^{*} The July/August 1983 issue of *Maximum Rocknroll* is particularly informative regarding young punks' political views, largely because a previous issue included an interview with the band the Dicks that discussed their communist viewpoint. Many of the letter writers felt compelled to critique (or support) that political perspective.

“[t]here is no threat,” the fact that “all their listeners agree with” such sentiments demonstrated how radicalized the community as a whole had become (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 4).

Critiques of capitalism, along with liberalism, were tacit themes in the punk scene’s internal debates about political theories; because the young punks were devoted to radical politics, their rejection of mainstream liberals was a given. As noted above, while the community was not a monolith, the overarching ethos of the punk community was a mix of anarchism (Jagusch, 2021) and provocation (Mattson, 2020). Dave from the Detroit area, for example, stated: “I’m an anarchist, because I believe all governments suppress the people. Anarchy is the only true freedom.” A letter writer, also based in Michigan, was quick to point out that anarchism was not a license for “chaos.” Almost echoing Kropotkin, the young person noted, “Chaos and Anarchy aren’t the same thing. . . . Chaos gets us nowhere.” Dave’s anarchist leanings fueled a scathing critique of the Texas-based band the Dicks and its communism. The Dicks “say that nobody fully understands communism and Marxism; then they say that nobody cares about politics. Well, now I know why they call themselves DICKS. . . . What if I am religious? You stupid commies wouldn’t let me celebrate religious holidays. What if I decided to hold a peaceful rally against some of the government’s policies? You’d [sic] lock me up. . . . You say you’re against fascism, but you practice the same tactics and ideals.” Tim Yo responded to Dave, noting that “there’s a difference between ‘true’ communism and the sham communism espoused by the U.S.S.R. and China. True communism is as idealistic as the anarchism you say you believe in” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, pp. 5-6).

As Tim Yo’s comment made clear, there were a number of punks who had not accepted anarchism as a viable political theory; rather their radicalism connected with other political theories. Steve from Albany, New York, noted:

Anarchist thinkers like Bakunin . . . seem so contradictory. . . . Bakunin states (as most anarchist thinkers do) that the state and the govt (presumably capitalist run) is the main evil and must be eliminated. To involve yourself in politics, then, would be a betrayal of principle, yes? The thing to do, according to Bakunin, is to organize the workers and abolish the state, abolish all authority, and replace it with a cooperating, autonomous community. This not only sounds cool and radical but appeals to young, bored intellectuals who foresee some kind of immediate Grecian utopia. Anarchy sounds like a great concept, but how can a society of even two individuals exist unless some autonomy is sacrificed? . . . I suggest some Frederich Engels for a real shot in the arm (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 8).

For Stern from Youth Brigade, existentialism—not anarchism, socialism, or communism—provided a gateway to radical politics. He noted that

in World War II, their whole country was taken over by the fascists, and it seemed like there was no hope. The most atrocious crimes in history were committed, and yet they still had hope, still fought. You’ve always got to fight. That’s what life is all about, to find some meaning, even in the face of the world seeming like it’s about to blow itself up. That’s the only thing that’s going to give your life meaning. . . . You’ve got to fight to better things, to be responsible. Every person is responsible to himself, and, as an example to all mankind, he’s responsible to everyone. One should act accordingly” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983a, p. 20).

For some, the divisions among the political radicals were of little concern; the pertinent issue was whether or not the punk scene was a leftist or reactionary force. Tim Yo summed up this position by noting that the more significant division “looks to be between those who support the scene, (try to make it a stronger, more intelligent alternative; encourage new bands; put on all-ages gigs, etc.), and those who’s [sic] only ‘contribution’ is to try to pull it all down with their negativity, back-stabbing, and tunnel-vision.” With regard to the opposition to the political nature of the community, Yo wrote “these attacks are merely smokescreens . . . it’s not that they are against ‘political’ punk; it’s that they are against the specific politics in question—PROGRESSIVE POLITICS!” (*Maximum Rocknroll*, 1983b, p. 4). Yet, by and large, the punks did support the radicalism of community, and that “hard left” was largely learned in the scene. At a time when neoliberalism was taking root on American soil and war—nuclear and traditional—was an ever-present fear, the radical politics and activism of the young punks was, according to one hardcore member, a real “hope for the world” (Small & Stuart, 1984).

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