

Punk AF: Resisting Postmodern Interpretations of Punk Culture in World Politics

Written by Patterson Deppen

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PATTERSON DEPPEN, JAN 21 2021

The distorted guitar sounds, rough recording techniques, and simple song structures of early 1970's punk bands like the Clash and the Sex Pistols have become iconic. What was once a subculture condemned by political figures like Margret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, and occupied the dark, dingy basements of outcast friend groups, has become hugely popular with cultural relics now being sold alongside tea towels of the royal family. Now in the twenty-first century, it remains difficult to define punk culture because of the differences in music and styles associated with the term. However, combined with its politically polarizing and anti-establishment lyrics, performances, and acts of rebellion, punk culture has become ripe for the academic spotlight subjecting it to various forms of analysis and critique. This has resulted in a whole discourse of postmodern interpretations of punk music, style, language, performance, art, and politics.

Despite this, little research is critical of linking punk's key actors, characteristics, and ideas to world politics through a postmodern lens. This article will serve to problematize postmodern attributes of punk to argue that it never really was the anti-racist, counter-hegemonic, and socio-politically resistant force many academics and participants claimed it to be. It has been found that some bands which do not have the same history of structural whiteness as those frequently spotlighted in postmodern interpretations, appear to form a counter-hegemonic culture based on lived experiences and real discourse, however, as this article will show, they too do not fit postmodern categorizations.

This article contains three sections (or verses). The first verse will introduce the concept of postmodernism and how it has been applied to not just punk, but also world politics, cultural studies, and music. Second, the connection between punk culture, music and world politics will serve to problematize attributes of punk deemed postmodern, specifically how different readings of punk culture either support or contradict the postmodern canon. Third, aspects of punk that contradict its previously ascribed postmodern attributes will be expanded upon, focusing on the culture's anti-racist mythos and individualized agency to further make the connection to world politics. This article has included quotes from punk figures under section titles so that they remain central to the argument. As oftentimes in academic punk studies, punks seem far removed from the discussion and are not treated as integral components. The quotes still serve to embody the key points made in each section and will continue to guide the reader throughout.

First Verse: Postmodern Interpretations Abound

Questioning anything and everything, to me, is punk rock. – Henry Rollins, former vocalist of Black Flag, no date.

This section will introduce key concepts of postmodernism originating in the 1970s. It will specifically show how postmodernism has been applied to the concepts of world politics, cultural studies, and music. The purpose of this section is not to debate the merits of postmodernism and whether it accurately describes the contemporary state of the world. Rather, this section will serve to create a more nuanced understanding of postmodernism as a theory and cultural practice that is important and far-reaching, but nonetheless still in debate. Although this article seeks to problematize scholarship that views punk as a postmodern phenomenon (see Moore 2004; Patton, 2018), it cannot

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be refuted that like punk, postmodernism remains contentious in debates around world politics and popular culture. This is an important quality shared by both postmodernism and punk which will be touched upon at the end of this section.

In this article, the term “postmodern” is understood from two key tendencies. First, it suggests a deconstruction of boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, using a practice called “bricolage” to recombine formerly incompatible styles. In cultural studies, this collapse of cultural distinctions has been attributed to the commodification of all cultural products under global capitalism (Harvey, 1989). In the music and art scene, postmodernism can be characterized by its intertextuality, or its ability to (re)create with objects and images from the past by allocating aspects from previous texts within both the modern and “original” (Jameson, 1991: 280-285). Second, it indicates the rejection of universal vantage points for understanding the world. This is especially useful in the social sciences, where postmodernism represents the deconstruction of metanarratives found in the previous modernist canon replaced with localized, self-reflexive, and contingent analyses in the search for truth (Lyotard et al., 1984: 11-23). Furthermore, in politics, postmodernism can signify a sense of revolutionary socio-political agency based not in class politics, but in the fragmented collection of identities and differences of new social movements (Melucci et al., 1989; Gitlin, 1995). While the merits of postmodernism and its contributions to the wider social sciences and humanities are still debated upon, its defining characteristics are important for understanding why it has been applied to punk in past scholarship.

From these two central tendencies, it is clear why scholars have touched upon the seemingly intrinsic qualities that punk, a culture defined by questioning the status-quo with acts of rebellion and resistance, shares with postmodernism. In fact, they gained increasing popularity and were developed in tandem throughout much of the 1970s and 1980s (Patton: 2018, 3). However, like the concept of postmodernism itself, there has been considerable debate about punk’s postmodern attributes. Moore (2004) argues that competing tendencies within punk (e.g. nihilism, cynicism, sincerity, independence) are all reactions to the same crises of postmodern society. While others have only found partial evidence for deeming punk as postmodern because the realities of its participants are subjective and difficult to categorize as postmodern (Muggleton, 2000). The Subcultures Network, based at the University of Reading, argues that punk is best understood from its inherent points of tension like avant-gardism and popularism, artificiality and realism, or individualism and collectivism (Worley et al., 2016: 7). From past work, it should be clear that punk does not fit neatly into a postmodern categorization. However, what makes something “postmodern” is still debated amongst the theory’s leading figures, especially for matters concerning culture and music. Kramer (2002: 13-14) argues that postmodern theory contains “a maddeningly imprecise musical concept”. To better understand what makes music “postmodern”, he suggests viewing postmodernism not as a historical period, but as an *attitude* that influences not only contemporary musical practices but also how we use music of past generations .

Furthermore, in punk scholarship, it is similarly argued that the culture is best defined as an ongoing *attitude* and not a scene that temporarily occupied a certain space in time before dissolving (Furness, 2012). Postmodernism and punk viewed as ongoing *attitudes* reveals a path forward to more nuanced interpretations of how the two relate. This is especially important moving forward because while definitions of postmodernism and punk remain elusive, their connection remains persistent throughout academia.

Second Verse: Problematizing Attributes of Punk Deemed Postmodern in World Politics

I don’t think punk ever really dies, because punk rock attitude can never die. – Billy Idol, former guitarist of Generation X, no date.

This section will connect punk culture to music and world politics to reveal how different readings of the culture can either support or contradict the postmodern canon. Like postmodernism, punk has been treated as a fad by scholars. Cultural scholar Steve Redhead (2019: 23-26) argued that punk occupied a certain moment in the history of pop and could not be considered a culture on its own, but rather a prolongation of pop music culture . An argument that resonates with scholars who are hesitant to identify as postmodernists because the “post” signifies a certain dependency or prolongation of modernity (Connor, 1997: 65). While certainly useful for analyzing pop music’s relation to world politics, it is vital to go beyond characterizations of punk that only reverberate the infamous epitaph:

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Punk is dead.

Therefore, scholars should go beyond the general contexts linking only punk music to wider cultural or political movements popular at any given time. The power of punk as a distinct culture, its relation to world politics and music, and how this has been interpreted to be postmodern cannot be understood otherwise. Randall (2004: 1) argues it is not accurate to claim that “the power of music *itself* can persuade, coerce, resist, or suppress”; rather, “the uses to which music is put, the controls placed on it, and discursive treatments of it” should be addressed in academia. Furthermore, Street (2003: 283) when writing on punk confirms the discursive power of music and argues it is also important to analyze the mechanics and practices that link music to politics. Therefore, it is just as important to focus on the performers and performances themselves and treat them as integral components of political and cultural movements.

Other scholars have also highlighted the important and highly political role that music within a culture plays in “the everyday”. They have noted how punk can take multiple forms of resistance (beyond the music) in everyday life through language, attitude, style, and social relations (Kellner, 1995: 187). Local underground punk basement shows that occur outside of the reaches of hegemonic forces (i.e. major record labels and concert venues) serve as an example of this. Furthermore, Patton (2018: 3) connects these forms of resistance to larger globalization movements of the late Cold War era, arguing that punk and its everyday resistance successfully distanced itself from hegemonic forces like the emerging post-Cold War global and political order by “avoiding, subverting, or co-opting networks of global capital”. Related to postmodernism, this is helpful for connecting punk’s cultural practices like DIY (think repurposed instruments, patched leather jackets, and basement shows) to postmodern techniques like bricolage (the practice of recombining once incompatible styles and domains). Furthermore, Reddington (2004) identifies the rise of women instrumentalists in 1970’s UK to the DIY and ‘anyone-can-do-it’ ethic of the punk rock movement. However, it is a simplification to view punk as an antithesis to the dominant, hegemonic culture of its time, thus neatly packaged as postmodern.

Despite ethics of the culture that fit well within the postmodern canon, like DIY or ‘anyone-can-do-it’ that empower participants, punk is often complicit in the rise of hegemonic power that further marginalizes the very same people many claim the culture empowers. This is a major flaw in attributing punk to postmodernism because while participants and scholars claim tolerance, inclusion, and progressive thinking to be at the core of the punk ethos, this article argues that this is not entirely true and only serves to create an anti-racist mythos around punk culture. For example, writing on the history of punk and racism, Roger Sabin (1999: 204) notes that despite the fact people of South Asian descent were the majority victims in racist murders in late 1970’s UK, punk musicians remained silent. There was some “ambivalence, or even hostility towards Asians” in punk because Asian immigrants were perceived as rivals to Britain’s largely homogenous, white working class of the time. Furthermore, punk-scholar Gerfried Ambrosch (2018) found that punks and skinheads hold three things in common: their angst, their disillusionment, and their discontent with mainstream society. Originating in the predominantly white working-class neighbourhoods of 1960’s London, skinhead groups were predominately made up of white British youths with deep-seated nationalistic, neofascist, anti-Semitic, and racist views – particularly infamous in the 1970s for attacking Pakistani immigrants in London’s East End.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, those labelled as immigrants, gays, feminists, and racial and ethnic minorities were all targeted as scapegoats by the skinhead community, and a small portion of punks (Ambrosch, 2018: 903). For example, the infamous British Nazi punk band ‘Skrewdriver’ and their songs like “White Power” (1983) made to incite racism and violence against minorities in the UK epitomize this strand of skinhead punks. However, it is important to distinguish this small fraction of punks from the wider popular punk scene at the time, as many bands like Steel Pulse, the Tom Robinson Band, and X-Ray Spex staunchly condemned racism and anti-homophobia. This section has served to problematize postmodern categorizations of punk and its relation world politics. The next section will reveal how a more critical reading of punk and its history of racism further deconstructs postmodern attributes of punk.

Third Verse: Punk Culture’s Anti-Racist Mythos and Individualized Agency

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F**k them for not helping me, for getting me all amped about all these politics. – James Spooner, documentary filmmaker and co-founder of Afro-Punk music festival, 2015.

The anti-racist mythos of punk usually forms a popular narrative that goes like this: many of the punks who held racist and fascist views came to understand that their anti-authoritarian struggle was against the hegemony of white capitalism, thus, they began to see the marginalized groups they formerly used as scapegoats as strong allies (Ambrosch: 2018). In some ways this appears to be true. For example, the establishment of Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) is evidence that many historians have used to “co-opt punk into a more long-term tradition of countercultural—left wing—dissent” (Sabin, 1999: 199). However, as this article also argues, both Sabin and Ambrosch ultimately believe that punks reputation for being anti-racist and anti-fascist was a result of ideological mythmaking by the British music media and punk performers themselves in *reaction* to the striking popularity of the racist National Front amongst white, working-class youth in the 1970s (1999: 200; 2018: 904). In keeping with the interrogation of punk’s postmodern qualities, this relates to arguments by critics like Habermas and Ben-Habib (1981) who condemn postmodernism for being merely a *reaction* to the modernist philosophical canon. This section will provide further evidence for why postmodern readings of punk are misguided because they serve to create grand narratives.

Scholars and commentators have linked this racist history of punk to the history of white outsiders and their identification with racial and cultural others (Mailer, 19: 2011). Because punks have historically come from white middle-class backgrounds, they do not face the same marginalization as those they culturally appropriate. Hence, calls for “white riots” by the Clash (1977) or white punk pioneer Patti Smith’s self-identification as a “nigger” in her song “Rock N Roll Nigger” (1978) are choices, albeit extremely racist and misguided, and *do not* represent the structural racism, violence, or marginalization that they face. Other examples of this are evident with the co-opting of reggae music by white punks in the UK and US (Sabin, 1999) and MC5’s identification with black rebellion in Detroit (NPR, 2018).

As this article argues, the racist history of punk is frequently neglected by scholars who attribute it to postmodernism. This reading of punk reveals its contradictions to the postmodern canon, different from those of the punk that “arose through transnational conversations that emerged in tandem with postmodernism along avant-garde artistic networks that stretched across the world” (Patton, 4: 2018). However, this quote depicting punk as a postmodern globalized phenomenon is interesting when related to world politics because punk-scholars have often described the story of punk as “one of agency and empowerment often overlooked by traditional international relations” (Dunn, 2008: 193). This reading of punk specifically applied to world politics further contradicts postmodern interpretations of individual agency as “a passive cacophony of language games in which all that is solid melts into air” (Gubrium and Holstein, 1995: 555). However, punk *does* present itself to be synonymous with individual agency (i.e. DIY) and resistance. It has been characterized by bold displays of individual rebellion. For example, angered by the popularity of punk merchandise and its appropriation by the mainstream, the son of the late punk icons Westwood and McLaren burned £5 million worth of punk memorabilia on a boat on the river Thames (Guardian, 2016). Bands that do not have the same history of structural whiteness as those spotlighted in postmodern interpretations, also appear to form a counter-hegemonic culture. As will be expanded upon, this is also a misleading interpretation of punk that ignores its structural whiteness.

The argument here is that within punk culture, it matters *less what* a participant says and/or does and matters *more how* they do it. Dunn (2008: 200-208) argues these acts of resistance can have desalinating effects around the rest of the world. Citing examples from Latin America, North Africa, and the Middle East, he argues that these individuals and groups “utilize the resources of the punk cultural field for agency and empowerment within international relations” . However, Dunn makes it appear that these cultures have borrowed punk (as if it is a solely western phenomenon) to support their own counter-hegemonic resistance. This is not an accurate narrative because it reinforces neoliberal claims that globalization represents the “free” flow of goods, people, and ideas. For example, the hugely popular Mexican punk band, Los Monjo, was unable to obtain a visa to tour the US because they could not afford to lose the \$200 processing fee (Vice, 2014).

Furthermore, the leader of the transnational punk band Gogol Bordello, with rotating band members from Ethiopia,

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Mexico, El Salvador, and China, ironically expressed his disdain for US immigration, and the ease that he, a white man from Ukraine (albeit still incredibly disadvantaged and racialized), was able to pass through immigration compared to his fellow band members: "Upon arriving to the melting pot/ I get penciled in as a goddamn white...Now that I'm living up in God knows where/ Sometime it gets hard without a friend" (2005). The punk bands, located outside of the US and UK scenes most frequently categorized as postmodern, have had to develop their own form of punk resistance based on their own social resources and politics unborrowed from the west. However, this still represents a variety of punk culture that sits outside of the postmodern canon because their discourse is not performative, but rather, representative of a real everyday resistance to hegemonic forces.

Conclusion

Rather than interpret punk and postmodernism as fully developed concepts, this article has treated them as related interrogative practices to argue that postmodern readings of punk that depict the culture as anti-racist, counter-hegemonic, and socio-politically resistant are misguided. The aim has been to problematize punk's attribution to postmodernity and question whether the culture was ever really the anti-racist, counter-hegemonic, and resistant force many claimed it to be. For punk, like with postmodernity, the issue is not that they are academic or cultural fads that only serve to upend the status-quo (i.e. modernity or mainstream popular music). Both the concept of postmodernity and the culture of punk are here to stay. They will continue to evolve through the wide support they receive from various academic, music, and political scenes, like the punk-scholars cited throughout this article. However, the willingness of some punk bands, commentators, and academics to regard punk as symbolic of postmodernity is of great concern because it creates a misleading grand narrative that punk culture, despite its structural whiteness, was anti-racist, counter-hegemonic, and socio-politically resistant.

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