

**‘THERE IS NO AUTHORITY BUT YOURSELF’:
WHAT IT MEANS TO THINK AND ACT IN DUNDEE’S DIY PUNK SCENE**

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During the course of my research into the punk rock scene in Dundee, I asked many people ‘what does punk mean to you?’ As I come to write up this project, I find myself struggling with the same question. As a musician of some years’ standing in the local punk scene, I had nevertheless rarely considered the implications of what it means to call oneself a ‘punk’ – to play the music, to listen to it, or to engage with the various ideological strands which underpin the community. In talking to people at shows, in asking them outright what punk *is*, I found myself questioning a number of assumptions which I had heretofore not realised that I held.

I conducted this research over the course of several months, mostly by attending a number of performances by punk bands (universally referred to by those in the scene simply as ‘shows’), by speaking to people, observing, and by conducting a few formal interviews. I found that ‘punk’ can be, and is, described variously as a genre of music and an ideology. In this paper I will show that it is a conflagration of both. I will outline how members of the Dundee punk scene described their ideology and how it influences their lives, before discussing certain apparent tensions between the scene’s stated ideology and the behaviour of some of its members. Finally, I will look to the theoretical work of Goffman (1959), Bauman (1992) and Durkheim (1982) in an attempt to analyse and explain those tensions.

‘WE ALL WANT THE SAME THINGS’;

IDEOLOGY AND THE DUNDEE PUNK SCENE

When I asked members of the punk scene what they considered punk to be I was surprised, and interested, to find that no one I spoke to described it first and foremost as a style of music. The approach to music within the scene is an effective way of gaining an understanding of how the community conceptualises itself. While some would argue that a particular style of music – a fast, aggressive and loud form of rock & roll – is enough to make an artist ‘punk’, still others would claim that the music is inconsequential – music played quietly by a solo

performer on the acoustic guitar or keyboard can be more punk than any band, so long as it is executed according to certain principles. Various informants told me that punk is a 'mindset', an 'approach' or a 'way of doing things'.

Punk, then, can be said to exist somewhere between an ideology and a behaviour, and this tension led me to a number of observations about how the community exists and how it operates. As noted, a great deal of the social organisation of this community is rooted in ideology. In general terms, this ideology can be said to be based in anti-authority and anti-establishment ideas, along with a dedication to mutual aid and what many scene members refer to as 'do it yourself' or 'DIY ethics'. DIY, in the context of various punk scenes, refers to the idea that individuals and groups can retain their independence, ethics and capacity for self-determination by rejecting what are perceived as institutional or established structures and literally doing things for and by themselves. In this notion, the undercurrents of individualism and anti-authoritarianism, which many members of the punk scene state their affinity for, are very much in evidence.

DIY is a wide-ranging idea and manifests itself in various ways. The organisation, booking and promotion of shows, the way music is produced and recorded, the production of physical merchandise such as CDs, T shirts and vinyl records, is all handled by people within the scene. The rhetoric of DIY ethics advocates a wholesale rejection of that which is seen as 'non-punk', referred to by informants variously as 'mainstream' or 'corporate' culture, or 'the man'. One informant had a simple - indeed rather blunt - interpretation of culture which exists outside of punk's DIY ethics: 'It's just different to normal y'know? A better way of doing things than how they're normally done.'

As well as the retention of a sense of independence, another motivating factor for the punk scene to keep as much of their activity, as it were, 'in-house' is the strong ideology of inclusivity, openness and mutual aid to which many scene members referred. Punk is seen by its adherents as a welcoming, friendly culture which endeavours to make a space for people to safely and confidently express themselves, regardless of the individual's identity. The implication here is that if the scene was not organised according to DIY principles, and was controlled by some other agency or authority, that control would be lost. Almost everyone I

spoke to lauded the punk scene as ‘inclusive’, ‘welcoming’, ‘non-judgemental’ or various words to a similar effect. Many referred explicitly to factors such as race and gender identity. In terms of DIY ethics, these ideas lead to a conviction that anything that can be achieved ‘institutionally’ can be achieved within the scene. I spoke to self-taught sound engineers, screen printers, artists, and others who were resolute in their assertions that a lack of formal training in their field, and the fact that they acquired the same skills as those who were formally trained, only in an alternative setting, put them at no disadvantage in terms of ability. The punk community agreed, and these people would work with bands and promoters who were committed to judging people and their work on merit, rather than formal qualifications. The scene as a community, in doing so, can be seen as a social space wherein the concept of mutual aid is paramount. Members are concerned with helping others however possible, and appear to be more concerned with doing so than they are with observing perceived or formal rules or institutional structures, or indeed with seeking to work for profit.

Moreover, the dedication to the idea of inclusivity extends beyond the concept of DIY and exists in the punk scene as an ideological goal in its own right. Writing about a festival which takes place annually in Dundee, one band member asserts that the show is ‘an open, welcoming, plural environment’ (Smith 2016, 6). This statement bespeaks a widely-held belief within the punk scene – that the community is for everyone. That message is explicitly displayed at many Dundee punk shows, where posters proclaim the ‘house rules’:

‘No Bigotry, No Sexism, No Racism, No Homophobia, No Transphobia, No Fascism,
No Violence, Respect the Space, Respect the Staff, Respect Each Other, Have Fun!’

Speaking to attendees at various shows, I found that the attempt to create or engender a welcoming environment was very much at the forefront of many people’s minds, and was largely successful. Probably the most discussed issues were gender identity and sexism. By conducting a number of casual observations of the crowds at shows, I found that non male-presenting attendees were somewhat underrepresented, and amongst band members and performers almost all self-reported or presented themselves as male. I was interested in how this fact would be received in the context of a community with such a strongly-stated dedication to the notion of equality and inclusivity and I found that scene members were more than willing to talk about it. Female participants tended to agree with my observations;

when I asked how her experience as a woman differed between punk shows and other means of socialising, one female attendee told me 'there's less of us' (i.e. females are less represented at punk shows than at other events) but went on to say that most punk shows felt 'friendlier' than pubs or nightclubs. This feeling was common among female scene members, who variously reported that punk shows felt 'free' and 'welcoming', particularly in comparison to their experiences outwith the community.

In discussing the ideology of punk with members of the community certain things were made clear. The ideology can be seen as the motivating factor in the development and maintenance of the community. Although no one I spoke to mentioned disliking punk rock music, and certainly a shared interest in music is how punks come together to form a scene in the first place, the perception of most members seemed to be that one would have no place in the scene if they did not engage with the ideologies of DIY, equality, inclusivity and a rejection of 'mainstream values'. At no point was I given the feeling that one would be unwelcome in the scene on the basis of not liking punk rock music.

'THE POWER DOES NOT WORK IN THE PRESENCE OF NONBELIEVERS';

IDEOLOGY, BEHAVIOUR & TENSION

As important as ideology was made to seem during my discussions with members of Dundee's punk scene, certain of my observations – and, indeed, my informants – cast doubt on quite how closely the ideology is adhered to in practice. As was the case in discussions about what makes musical performers 'punk', there seemed to be little agreement within the scene as to exactly what types of behaviours could be seen as 'punk', or befitting of the punk ideology. Phrases such as 'non-punk' or 'unpunk' came up numerous times during discussions, and led me to a number of conclusions as to how the punk ideology interacted with and informed the behaviour of people in the scene.

The idea of rejection is again important to the analysis of how punks' lives were influenced by their ideology. It is notable that, as well as rejecting what they saw as 'mainstream' values, many punks seemed willing to reject people *within* the scene whose values they decreed were incompatible either with their own or with those of the scene generally. I spoke to many

people who were quick to denounce others for being 'unpunk' or 'not punk enough' as a result of behaviours ranging from dress sense to musical taste to political belief. For my part, I felt that a degree of contradiction existed in some scene members' readiness to declare others 'non-punk' or to decry them for their beliefs, given the dedication expressed by many of the same people to the idea of inclusivity. In further discussions it became clear that the ideologies upon which the scene is built were seen as so important and taken so seriously that some felt they demanded to be 'defended', and the way to do so was to take steps to ensure the ideology was followed by all members of the scene. This behaviour speaks to a clear problem in the punk ideology; that is the question of how an ideology based on individual freedom can exist in the face of the requirement that authority of some kind is needed to ensure that the ideology is followed. This tension certainly merits a greater deal of analysis than is possible here, so it must suffice to say that in this self-proclaimed anti-authoritarian community, certain types of social power were clearly perceptible.

One person I spoke to noted that a strain of elitism ran through the community, and even used the word 'authoritarian' to describe some members of the scene. It was noted that the power which exists within the punk community generally derived from the fact that some members had spent more time in the community, and were perceived as 'more experienced' than others. The notion of 'defending the ideology' was again seen as important to the execution of this power; 'experienced' scene members appeared to justify their authoritarian stance as a means of educating those newer to the community about the ideology and its workings. Again the tension implicit in the ideology of individualism was apparent – while the scene's powerful members saw their dispersion of the ideology as vital to its maintenance, the practice of that dispersion seemed to be contradictory to it. I spoke to someone new to the scene who reported feeling 'spoken down to' – she told me 'at my first show [she is the singer in a newly-formed band] it felt like the guys putting the show on were just speaking over me, hardly any of them spoke *to* me. And it was always 'she' or 'her' instead of actually learning my name. Like, I know I'm a girl and I'm quite short but I'm still a person.' As a result of this experience she said she felt the scene in many ways to be 'judgemental' and 'unwelcoming.'

Another issue which made intra-scene authority fairly obvious, and indeed somewhat less convoluted than described above, was again the question of gender. Although, as previously noted, a great deal of non-male punks reported positive feelings towards the amount of sexism in the scene, it was by no means described as an anti-patriarchal idyll. A number of the non-male scene members I spoke to made it clear that although within the punk scene they felt they were subject to *less* sexism than outside of it, it was not completely absent.

The way this feeling was described spoke to a wider feeling which apparently exists among punks. As has already been noted, many spoke of the difference between the scene and 'normal' life. The positioning of punk as 'outside of normality' was fascinating to me. It appeared to me that there was a widespread and strong belief within the punk scene that theirs was a discrete culture, separate from the 'mainstream'. The mainstream, in turn, appeared to exist within the shared punk mindset as a largely imagined structure, a monolithic culture characterised by many of those things which punk sets itself against – sexism, racism, capitalism, etc. This idea speaks to a number of apparent contradictions perceptible within the punk scene and its ideology, the first and most obvious being the issue of sexism. Many people mentioned that they had witnessed or experienced sexism at punk shows, casting doubt on the idea that punk is a discrete culture which rejects bigotry and inequality. Of course, the idea that punk culture is notably distinct from mainstream culture is not totally undermined by the fact of sexism existing within it, but the idea that it rejects what it sees as the 'mainstream values' of patriarchy and gender inequality can certainly be called into question.

Conducting fieldwork within Dundee's punk scene, it became very clear to me that ideology was at the forefront of the minds of many of the scene's members. Through observation and analysis, though, I found that there was no small amount of tension between the ideas which many punks proclaimed to be important and the actual behaviours in evidence within the community. Many of the behaviours I observed, and was told about in discussions with scene members, called the scene's stated dedication to its ideology into question, sometimes even tending towards outright contradiction. In the next section I will turn to the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and others in order to provide a theory-based critique and analysis of those behaviours.

'A NEW NAME FOR EVERYTHING';

A CRITIQUE OF BEHAVIOUR IN THE PUNK SCENE FROM SOCIAL THEORY

Goffman, in his study *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), attempts to explain behaviour by drawing an allegory with the theatre. He describes behaviours in terms of being 'front stage' or 'back stage', referring simply to the behaviours carried out when the actor believes they are being watched and when they believe they are alone. Goffman offers a number of explanations for the differences between these two types of behaviour, most of which hinge on the idea that the expectation of a community will influence the behaviour of someone who feels they are a part of that community (Goffman 1959, 28-30). In the context of the Dundee punk scene, it seems clear that the expectation is that members will act in accordance with the accepted ideology of DIY punk. That being the case, it would appear that in Goffmanian terms scene members believe their ideological rhetoric to be more visible than their actual behaviour, given that the ideology of the scene has been established to be of paramount importance, while certain behaviours seem distinctly out of step with the ideology.

A number of explanations may be offered as to why scene members feel comfortable with the apparent contradictions between their stated beliefs and observable behaviours. The work of both Émile Durkheim and Zygmunt Bauman can be drawn upon to explore, and provide a possible explanation for, the apparent gulf between scenes members' front stage and back stage presentations. Bauman (1992), drawing heavily on the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard (1983, 2-4), proposes a widespread destabilisation of the notion of reality as a motivator of social behaviour (Bauman 1992, 149-55). He suggests that the ubiquity of Baudrillardian simulations in postmodern social contexts is sufficient to render the concept of 'reality' redundant as far as either belief or behaviour are concerned (*ibid.*, 153). With regard to the punk scene, this argument supports the idea that for many punks the statement of an ideological ideal appears almost analogous with the performance of the behaviour which it bespeaks. By merely stating their allegiance to a particular ideology, punks bring about a condition in which behaviours in line with that ideology are simulated, and the tension between ideology and action – like Baudrillard and Bauman's tension between reality and unreality – becomes inconsequential.

Perceived inconsistencies or contradictions in the behaviour observed in the Dundee punk scene may also be examined in the context of Durkheim's *Rules of Sociological Method* (1982 [1895]). A Durkheimian approach to power in this particular community would take a similar idea for its basis as would an approach from Bauman's postmodern critique. It must be imagined that a social force outside of the perception of the scene's powerful members, though latent in their thinking, acts upon them and can explain their behaviour. Durkheim argues that communities persist through the continued agreement upon, and reproduction of 'social facts', the norms which the members of a society are assumed to agree are fundamental to the society's success (Durkheim 1982 [1895], 52). Although the punk scene is resolute in its rejection of 'mainstream' norms, it is clear from the reverence with which ideology is approached in this scene that a discrete system of alternative social facts, unique to the scene, are widely agreed upon. For those members of the scene who claim, or are seen to possess, an intimate knowledge of these facts, their reproduction may be seen as paramount, even if the behaviours deployed in that reproduction sometimes appear contradictory to the facts themselves.

'END HITS';

FINAL REFLECTIONS ON DUNDEE'S PUNK SCENE

At the beginning of this research I asked myself and others what it means 'to be punk'. I found the answer to that question incredibly complex. To be punk is to desire to create, and exist within, a community of like-minded individuals who share a dedication to the ideas of acceptance of one another and rejection of 'mainstream' values seen as oppositional to the community's beliefs. This community is created through the dedication to a strongly-stated set of ideological beliefs. With this desire to create, however, comes a necessity to maintain, and the maintenance of the scene often exposes tensions within the ideology itself. In order to survive, it appears that the punk scene must consistently contradict itself – the doctrine of acceptance has to be abandoned in order to reject that which threatens it.

'To be punk', then, means simultaneously to devote oneself to a particular worldview, while simultaneously acting against the values which that worldview engenders and reveres. However, it also means creating and maintaining strong links to a community based on

progressive and positive ideals which, despite the inherent problems with its ideological base, still strives to better the lives of its members by creating and facilitating physical and social spaces of acceptance, inclusivity and free expression. Whether these positive aspects are worth the tension brought about by the apparent impossibility of the punk scene's ideology to ever truly work according to its stated objectives must remain a question for the members of the scene themselves. It appears that many have made their choice.

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