

Why doesn't the edgy and rough image of punks exactly reflect their ideologies?

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WRT II: Pop Culture

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April 15th, 2021

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What do you first think of when you hear the word “punk”? Is it the colorful spiky hair or the studded leather jackets and piercings? Punk culture has been around as early as the 1970s and continues to influence some of our music today. The subculture involves loud music, edgy clothes, left-wing politics and morals, and an overall rebellious aesthetic. Most people think it's nothing but violent, rebellious kids in leather jackets with spiky hair. Society's wrong assumptions about punks tend to give the community a bad reputation without thoroughly looking into the values, ethics, and beliefs they share. From the spiky hair, leather boots, and piercings, punks may come off as unapproachable and scary to some. However, strong positive social and political movements run deeper underneath it all, proving that this negative stigma should be dismantled.

BACKGROUND

The first thing one may notice about a punk is their unorthodox fashion. Traditional punk style would consist of leather jackets (often decorated in spikes, studs, or patches), tight plaid trousers, high top Chuck Taylors or Dr. Marten boots. Bright and colorful mohawks were flaunted as deviation from typical hairstyles. Although anti-racist, early punks occasionally wore shirts with hate symbols such as swastikas for shock value. In his article about the evolution of punk, an experienced writer in social movements and history professor, Bradford Martin, explains, “Another obvious transgressive element of the 1970s punk, sexual fetish clothing and apparatus, sought to shock the mainstream by publicly parading fashion elements previously associated with sexual taboo, such as rubber trousers and studded bracelets, in order to demystify them by making them commonplace” (Martin, 2006, p. 150). Progressively, contemporary punks

dressed like the average person and contrasted with the vibrant early punk style, sporting a t-shirt and dark jeans with boots and a low haircut. This was called hardcore fashion. Bands like Black Flag and Circle Jerks were a demonstration of this.

At the time of punk rock's birth, artists believed rock n roll was becoming too tame and it needed to be wild and rebellious like in its prime in the 1950s. Phillipov continues, "Punk was a watershed of sorts in that it seemed to transform popular music, raising new questions about audience, commodity production and musical meaning..." (Phillipov, 2006, p. 384). Emerging from 1960s garage rock, the punk rock sound contained loud, aggressive guitars and provocative lyrics which rejected traditional mainstream rock. A trending topic among most songs were about punk ideologies and values while some were about raunchy sex, romance, and partying. Bands started developing and playing withing a network of small local venues which enforced their Do-it- yourself (DIY) ethic. Soon, punk rock became an outlet for artists to express their freedom.

Sick of the unfair treatment of the working class, punks tended to take extreme left-wing politics over right politics and even sometimes abandoning both parties. During a punk show for the bands Crass and Rondos, a huge fight broke out among the crowd. "The gig has become notorious in British punk history due to the violence that broke out between right-wing and left-wing factions, bringing to the fore wider political tensions evident across punk's fragmented milieu" (Lohman & Worley, 2018, p. 51). Crass believed strongly in anarchism as self-expression. This political standpoint was adopted by many punks along with anti-government and anti- authoritarianism.

HATE AND VIOLENCE

While most punks took a liking to left wing views, there were racist punks (often referred to as “fake punks”) that used real punks’ ethics to their advantage and proved the negative stigma around them merely being violent deviants right. They created several subgenres centered around hate, a couple being Oi! And Rock Against Communism (RAC). They also created their own records which “...were established specifically to support the activities of a small number of neo-fascist groups who were blacklisted by mainstream producers and distributors within the music industry” (Raposo & Bestley, 2020, p. 470). This was a demonstration of real punks’ DIY ethic which urged punks to be independent and do it themselves whether it be producing music, self-promotions, or concert production. Naturally, being all about peace, the rest of the punk community didn’t let this last. “Rock Against Racism (RAR) was formed in 1976 in response to racist sentiments expressed by rock stars Eric Clapton, who declared his support for xenophobic politician Enoch Powell, and David Bowie, who was using fascist iconography, while stating publicly that he believed “Adolf Hitler was one of the first rock stars” (Roberts & Moore, 2009, p. 25). Routinely at shows, racist punks would try to infiltrate and bring violence but there were always real punks ready to fight and escort them out. This proves that racist fake punks did not define the whole community, as there were many efforts to keep violence and hate out.

Another aspect in punk culture that fuels the negative stigma of punks is the edgy appearance. As forementioned, the punk style consisted of very graphic and sometimes offensive shirts usually for shock value. They would have swastikas or other unnerving images which would shock the media especially if it didn’t match the artists’ ideals and values. Michelle Philipov (2006), a philosopher, explains “Certainly, a good deal of punk scholarship has demonstrated how political ideologies inevitably have aesthetic consequences, but it does not automatically follow that aesthetic practices straightforwardly embody political agendas.” The

aesthetic practices of punks, being controversial and unnerving, does not immediately reflect and contrasts with the deeper positive values and morals that society assumes they lack. Similar to a person who has an abundance of tattoos, a person with a mohawk or piercing does not automatically have bad intentions.

With the loud aggressive music, comes the violent aggressive dancing called “moshing” that can often be mistaken for anger and malicious intent. Again, Philipov explains the contrast between the wild aesthetic and positive agenda, “...the ideologies of rebellion of the two different groups (the desire for complete freedom and anarchy, and the need for control and strength in maintaining lifestyle choices, respectively)” (Philipov, 2006, p. 391). Punk shows are safe spaces for rebellion and lawlessness where punks can express themselves. Like any other form of dancing, moshing is an art and form of expression and should be perceived as so. In this case, it's an expression of freedom and liberation from authority.

POLITICS AND ETHICS

The term “selling-out”, a label despised by punks, is for any person, particularly an artist, that claims to adhere to a set of morals or principles yet compromises their integrity and conforms to the mainstream in exchange for money or fame. An example of this would be the late punk band, Hüsker Dü's transition from hardcore punk to alternative rock and later being signing with Warner Bros. “In the wake of this signing, some of Husker Du's original fan base felt alienated, and charged the band with “selling out” and abandoning its politics” (Martin, 2002, p. 165). This emphasizes the significance and importance of staying true to oneself no matter what the circumstances are to punk culture, correlating with most of society's moral mantras to “be yourself” and be confident in who you are, validating their positive intentions.

Another substantial ethic to punks is the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic. This encourages “participants to move beyond the role of consumers and instead become actively involved by distributing self-produced zines, organizing shows (often in atypical venues, such as union halls and basements of houses), or starting their own bands...” (Barrett, 2013, p. 26). Having total control over music and shows is more favorable than consuming from experts or institutions they consider corrupt which is why it's so valued in punk culture. Parallel to society's praise and support of small local businesses by communities and rejection of exploitive industries that use unethical practices like child labor, the punk community possesses the same praise and support for independency, proving them no different to some of the generally accepted morals of society.

A common political agenda among punks is Anarchism which could falsely associated with chaos or riots when in fact, it's a peaceful rebellion against authority. Crass, a band that was one of the prominent pioneers for Anarchists were asked to explain their ideologies and responded, ‘You say you can't talk about a state of anarchy occurring because it exists already on a personal level, but surely it can't exist fully on a personal level when you're still surrounded by the system?’ (Crass as cited in Lohman & Worley, 2018, p. 59) This reveals the true motive behind Anarchy which is will for personal responsibility and autonomy without being under the stifling control of external power, proving that the negative connotation of chaos and rioting associated with Anarchy false.

DISMANTLING THE STIGMA

During the war against authority and racist punks trying to defame the true punk image, the punk scene tended to subconsciously exclude black voices and other people of color (POC). Luckily, 45-year-old James Spooner from New York founded the Afropunk Fest in 2005 which

welcomes punks of all ages and backgrounds to attend and enjoy music annually. When making a documentary about POC in the punk community, he said, “This conversation wasn’t happening on a broad enough scale. There were always black kids and brown kids peppered throughout the scene, but I literally had to drive across the country just to meet, like, 80 [of them]” (Holley, 2019). His efforts to make to make to scene more inclusive are demonstrated in his determination to bring the punks of color together through festivals and overall creating a safe and fun place to unite.

The scene is becoming way more inclusive as punks from different backgrounds are uniting in shared spaces more often unlike before. ‘There used to be an attitude back in the day that rock music wasn’t ‘black.’ That’s not true.’...The concert was put on by Punk Black, a collective whose mission is to promote diverse acts in the overwhelmingly white world of rock ‘n’ roll.’ (Sanchez, 2019) Innovation and growth towards a more diverse community is shown in this independent black punk group defying the standards. By acknowledging the flaws of early punk, developing welcoming spaces for all kinds of punks will be significantly easier.

Most people with a negative opinion of punks very likely have not yet heard them out firsthand. While the research and evidence done to prove their good intentions, there are many podcasts such as “Turned out a Punk” or “Washed up Emo” are listens for anybody wanting a personal account or opinions from punks themselves that also reveal their genuineness.

After exploring the structure of the punk subculture, we see the many elements that most people fail to see. While there are hateful and violent subgroups within the scene that may prove the close-minded opinion of punks true, the fundamental values of the culture such as positive

morals, political views, and social movements defeat that and prove otherwise. As mentioned before, dismantling this negative perception starts with hearing them out, reading up on them, and listening to their stories. By doing this, punks can live confidently in their values, beliefs and unique aesthetic without being ridiculed by society.

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