

Anarchy in the U.K.

The Power & the Punk

Bob Nirkind

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“If you support this motion, you will not assist the government. You will paralyze it and indeed stand in danger of destroying it”

—Jack Jones, veteran trade union leader, pleading with delegates to the convention of the Transport and General Workers’ Union not to refuse the extended wage restraint of England’s celebrated “Social Contract” between the unions and the Labor government. The motion was supported.

“I don’t understand it. All we’re trying to do is destroy everything.”

—Johnny Rotten, lead singer for The Sex Pistols, England’s most controversial “punk rock” band, responding to questions concerning recent street attacks upon group members and the hysterical mass denunciation of the band by the media.

If it’s actually true that from the history of mass movements you can perceive the social and economic mood of a nation at a given period in time, then the current chaotic state of British affairs should be somewhat more comprehensible in view of the actions of the punk rock movement and the working class revolt.

Singularly distinct and yet inexorably related, these two movements have in common the base of having risen up out of a crisis situation within capitalism. Both stem from similar feelings of anger and frustration inherent in living in an environment which reeks from the decline and decay of its superstructure. And although one movement is basically economic while the other is primarily social, a common ground remains in their impassioned attempts to dismantle attitudes and institutions rather than to buttress them.

Buried deep in stagflation, Britain’s economy only recently has shown any outward appearances of stabilizing, that stabilization due to a great extent to its newly-realized North Sea oil interests. Even those interests can’t be expected to solve all the problems of the nation’s pathetically anemic economy though, and in the opinion of one employer’s federation in England, without a profitable industrial base those oil interests will ultimately dissipate into unproductive expenditures.

The North Sea interests notwithstanding, the danger signs still remain on all fronts: runaway inflation (now standing at 16.5% annually); an unstable pound (whose worth was barely rescued at the close of last year by the International Monetary Fund); massive and rising unemployment, currently riding above 1.6 million; cutbacks in health care, social services and education; industrial production holding at 7% below its 1973 peak; a huge, albeit decreasing, trade deficit; violent racial confrontations two years running at the Notting Hill Carnival in the multi-racial Notting Hill Gate section of London (one such confrontation labeled a “white riot” due to the zealotry with which police provoked and attacked black youths); the rise of the quasi-fascist extreme right-wing National Front as a political alternative to the ineffectual and anachronistic policies of the Labor, Conservative and Liberal parties; and England’s senseless, as well as costly, involvement in the bloody clashes in Northern Ireland.

Despite the Labor government's all-out efforts to halt Britain's economic collapse (at the expense, as ever, of the working class) and in spite of indications of at least marginally brighter days ahead, the damage has already been done—the chasm between state and citizen, between society and individual, has been opened wider.

Britain's work force especially has grown increasingly disenchanted with its lot in life owing to a great extent to the bill of goods it was sold back in mid-1974 when the Trades' Union Congress (TUC) agreed to the Labor Party's "Social Contract" after accepting the claim that a wage restraint would help defeat inflation, reduce unemployment, restore confidence in the pound and create a stable base for economic expansion.

Promised the moon, but given the shaft for their sacrifice—achieving nothing save for setting a 10-year low for strikes—the British wage laborer has responded bitterly in the past year with a multitude of crippling slow-downs and walk-outs aimed at bringing the government to its knees—an aim it appears to be satisfying in part, but which will also undoubtedly result in another traditionally fruitless shift from Labor Party to Conservative rule.

Unwilling to remain static, but unable to see beyond the trappings of capital, the British work force—having already given over its authority and autonomy to the bureaucratic mediation of the TUC—has tragically manifested the lion's share of its indignation in purely materialistic terms. Rather than using their new-found leverage to demand greater control over their own lives, the British worker asks instead for massive wage increases (the railwaymen a 63.5% increase, the miners a 56% increase, the production workers at Ford Motors better than a 25% increase, etc.) and a greater piece of the pie.

And, just when worker solidarity is most vital, a significant rift within the work force has been developed as the trade unions have managed to convince the skilled working class to hold out for pay differentials—a move intended to further exacerbate the disparity already present.

New Subculture Emerges

As is wont to happen in times as tense, as chaotic and as despondent as these, times when people become truly cognizant of how little control they actually have over their own life and how overwhelming an influence capital has, a whole new and aggressive subculture emerged from England's suffocatingly stagnant social and economic environment in the early months of 1976.

The offspring of low-income working-class families, bored, frustrated and betrayed by the conditions under which they felt they were being forced to live, the "punk rockers," as they were labeled by the media, developed a new hierarchy of values dominated almost exclusively by the virtues of being young.

The earliest manifestation of the punk movement came about along fashionable Kings Road in London; where the rather well-to-do potentates of high fashion suddenly found themselves face-to-face with their diametrical opposites—working class and lower middle class kids whose idea of dress, in parodied accordance with their social and economic status, was torn jeans and t-shirts (with the rips joined together with safety pins) often emblazoned with commands such as Destroy! or Eat Shit!, swastika emblems, spiky black hair (occasionally replaced by a heavily-greased and swept-up two-tone job of blue, orange or green), and pierced ears, or cheeks, filled in with a safety pin or two.

In an effort to be even more outrageous, to be even more unacceptable to their elders, some have gone so far as to wear parachutes or large plastic trash bags with holes cut for their arms and legs in place of "normal" clothing. One enterprising punk went one step further and paraded around Kings Road wearing a clean white shirt dressed up with two bloody chunks of raw meat safety-pinned to the material. Needless to say, the "fashionable" have found the punks to be intimidating—especially when marching down the street in groups, pushing, spitting and fighting amongst themselves—and as a result are abandoning their territory to them.

In an effort to at least put some fun back into what they see as unacceptably unattractive and uninspiring lives, the punks stormed the music scene in England and established their own particular brand of rock, a hybrid which merges the intensity and urgency of the heyday of rock 'n roll with the bitterness, the anger and the humor of England's new generation of youth.

Alienated from the elitist pretensions of their former heroes/now millionaire rock 'n roll stars—whose persistent whining about their high-income tax status touched no one's heart—and tired of hearing lethargic, light-

weight, self-indulgent songs about long-lost loves, life on the road, worlds of fantasy, Southern California and impending middle age, the punks concluded that if no one else could play what they wanted to hear, if no one else could adequately articulate their estrangement and intense boredom (the catch word of the subculture), then they'd teach themselves to play musical instruments, form their own bands and damn well play their own Music.

"Everyone is so fed up with the old way," explained Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols' caustically charismatic vocalist. "We were constantly being dictated to by musical old farts out of university who've got rich parents. They look down on us and treat us like fools and expect us to pay pounds to see them while we entertain them and not the other way around. And people let it happen! But now they're not. Now there's a hell of a lot of new bands come up with exactly the opposite attitude. It's not condescending any more. It's plain honesty. If you don't like it—that's fine."

Abrasive Sound

In contrast to the heavily-financed, well-rehearsed, carefully composed and thoroughly sanitized music of their elders—The Rolling Stones and The Who, for example, both one-time "rebel" bands now wealthy show business celebrities—the punks' sound is ragged and abrasive. Their instrumentation is the basic stripped-to-the-bone guitar/bass/drums/vocals; their songs are short with break-neck tempos, minimal chord changes, slight tonal variations and ear-piercing volume.

The first, and most influential of these so-called "New Wave" bands was The Sex Pistols, whose initial public exposure consisted of simply showing up at club's and pretending to be the support act. At the start, musically unrefined and antagonistic, they literally dared their audience to like them. "I bet we hates you more than you hate us," Johnny Rotten once sneered at a roomful of listeners.

Lambasted by the rock press for being incompetent and barred from various clubs for fighting with members of the audience, initiating brawls and throwing chairs, the Pistols in their short careers as performers have managed to create greater furor in Britain than any band since The Beatles commented that they were more popular than Jesus Christ.

Their first single, "Anarchy In The U.K.," became a nationwide success even as major record outlets refused to carry it. Its lyrics certainly did nothing to endear the group to the English establishment: "I am an anti-christ / I am an antichrist / Don't know what I want but I know how to get it / I wanna destroy passers-by / I wanna be anarchy / Anarchy in the U.K. / Coming for you, coming for me."

Defying and assaulting convention at every turn, the Pistols became the media's symbol of everything corruptive and ugly about Britain. Ever the purveyors of sensationalism, even as workers struck and battled police at Grunwick, the National Front marched through Lewisham provoking a riot and the economy sank lower by the day, the press gave over its front pages to vilifications of the Pistols and the punk rock movement. In what now appears to have been taken to heart by the fourth estate, a member of Parliament once said of punk rock: "If music is going to be used to destroy our established institutions, then it ought to be destroyed first!"

As dedicated as the press has been to destroying the Sex Pistols, the band yet remains, even through two record label signings and subsequent dissociations, local town council bans preventing them from performing in England and a massive newspaper smear campaign allying the group with the National Front.

If anything, the media's assault on the Pistols has reinforced the band's conception of things and spurred them on to even greater heights of invective. Before being forced from their second recording contract, they managed to record what's become both a punk anthem and a national embarrassment with their single "God Save the Queen," a biting salute to Britain's much-touted non-event, Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee: "God Save the Queen / a fascist regime / made you a moron / a potential H-bomb / God save the queen / she ain't no human being / there is no future in England's dream... There's NO FUTURE / NO FUTURE / NO FUTURE for you!" Hardly the epitome of finely-crafted song lyricism, the tune nevertheless articulates in a driving, direct and uncompromising manner the anger, the disgust, the boredom and the nihilism of what has been labeled "The Blank Generation."

Following the Pistols into the punk scene were other bands with names as stark and evocative as their song titles and stage presence—The Clash, The Damned, The Adverts, The Unwanted, The Slits, The Buzz-cocks, X-Ray

Specs and Eater, singing songs with titles like “So Messed Up,” “I’m So Bored With the U.S.A.,” “Remote Control,” “Bored Teenagers” and “Oh Bondage / Up Yours.” Enthusiastic and colorful, what these bands lack in instrumental proficiency they’ve made up for in energy and commitment.

Living Off the Dole

Unlike similarly labeled punk bands in the States, the members of punk groups in England—save for the inevitable cheap, posturing imitations such as The Stranglers, a mediocre thirtyish group hoping to make it at long last by jumping on the bandwagon—genuinely come from lower income deprived backgrounds. Estranged from British society and all its social programming, they’ve forsaken their job slot at the bank to live off the dole, England’s welfare system.

Far from providing a reasonably comfortable existence, the dole just the same has been looked upon as being a sensible alternative to working a piss-awful shit job for shit wages. It’s certainly been a welcome gift to bands such as The Adverts, whose members have been able to weather poor-paying tour dates by returning home to London periodically to pick up their checks. Before playing in a band, of course, being on the dole wasn’t always so pleasurable, or at least, not to everyone.

“Before (being in a band signed to a recording contract), explains Clash guitarist Joe Strummer, “most of the time all I could think about was my stomach. A lot of time me and Paul (Simonon, Clash’s bassist) did nothing else but wonder where our next meal was coming from. We were hungry all the time.”

“And the dole was threatening to send me to Birmingham on some government re-training scheme. We couldn’t think about the reasons behind anything.”

“Music should be fun.” Johnny Rotten has replied in the British rock trades. “It’s meant to be a relief from working 9 to 5 in a factory. It shouldn’t be about some cunt (meaning Strummer) on a stage yapping about how terrible it is to be on the dole.”

“Cuz,” he sneered slyly, “when I was on the dole it was not terrible: I was being paid for not working...I was getting paid a tenner a week. More than I’m getting now.”

Impact of Punks

What actual impact the punk movement has had on and will have on Britain is as yet not-entirely clear. Certainly its very existence appears to pose a threat, either real or imagined, to the British establishment, which has reacted, as-always, through its legal system and its control of the media.

What the impact of the punk movement has had on working class youth is also unclear thus far. Certainly there are thousands, and possibly tens of thousands, of British youths who’ve embraced the spirit of the movement, either out of an authentic distaste for government and authority or else simply out of a need to be a part of something—to be able to identify with a sect whose glamour lies, in part, in its steadfast refusal to accept adults.

On the other hand, the great majority of British youth still walk the straight and narrow, passively accepting its schooling and ultimately graduating into full-fledged members of the British work force. In their eyes the punks are nothing but noxious aberrations. They react vehemently against the punks’ anti-monarchy/anti-authority stance and have, on occasion, even been moved to acts of-violence to emphasize their disgust.

While on the surface the punk movement looks appealing, especially in its rejection of the status quo, it still leaves many questions unanswered. Born out of an anti-bourgeois/anti-establishment hard line, can the movement sustain its purity and energy once its mode of dress and manner of music become acceptable within the mainstream? Will the angry young men and women of Britain today become willing fabricators of tomorrow’s punk mythology, selling instant anger and frustration on every street corner in England in magazine and paperback form? More importantly, will the apolitical, anti-authoritarian lumpen proletariat of the ‘70s become the fascists of the ‘80s?

Whether the rebelliousness, the creative energy and the enthusiasm of the punk movement survives or, like the workers movement, lingers on in a less offensive, bastardized form remains to be seen. Already there are indications that the minions of capitalism are winning out. Recuperative in much the same way as the trade unions are within the working class revolt, major and minor record labels have been busily falling all over themselves buying up and packaging every punk band, every “anti-establishment” attitude in England. It takes little foresight to predict the outcome.

“I get very sick with the imitations. I despise them. They ruin it. They have no reason to be in it other than wanting money,” which shows. You’ve got to have your own point of view. You can have an idol, like you may see a band and think, “God, that band are really fucking good, I’d like to be like that.” So you start up your own band, and then your own ideas come in as well on top of that and you have a foundation. But a lot of those bands don’t leave that foundation and they stay in a rut and they listen to all the other songs in their morbid little circle and they do rewrites of them. Hence fifty thousand songs about how hard it is to be on the dole.”

—Johnny Rotten.

“The entire American music industry is poised to turn you into the next big thing. They’ll suck out any integrity the band has.”

—Sid Vicious, bassist for The Sex Pistols.

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