

Is Trump The “Punk” President?

Nothing could be farther from reality

Brian James Schill

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Unbelievably, it has become fashionable among some observers of the American political scene to associate the alt-right with punk rock, lauding Donald Trump for his “punk” presidency.

The liberal magazine, *The Atlantic*, noted in 2016, that Trump and his supporters “created a space in American politics that is uniquely transgressive, volatile, carnivalesque, and (from a certain angle) punk rock.” Similarly, the *New York Post* gushed that Trump “is a guy with a safety pin through his nose and a purple mohawk.”

Elsewhere, *Slate* writer and *New York Times* columnist, Michelle Goldberg, grinned as one clean-cut Trump supporter told her that his alt-right confederates are “the new punk rock” and *The Week* dedicated an entire column to the purported connection.

And why not? His carrotty coif and contempt for his own audience notwithstanding, is Trump not following punk’s lead when he mocks the mainstream media, ejaculates perfunctory communiqués late into the night, and promotes a rather impulsive politics?

Although punkers come in many varieties of styles and politics, they and alt-righters have taken to task not only the political status quo but neoliberal economics, the culture industry, and the mainstream media. They both deploy violence in their aesthetics and practice. They hate hippies.

One might even imagine a parlor game where phrases from a speech by alt-right.com founder, Richard Spencer, are juxtaposed with pages from Henry Rollins’s *Get in the Van* or liner notes from an album by Swedish anti-capitalist hard-core group, *Refused*.

Who said it? “The decrepit values of Woodstock and Wall Street mean nothing to us...Industrialized countries are being transformed into great ‘nothings’ and ‘nowheres’: indistinguishable, concrete dumping grounds...” Yes, it was Spencer.

While such discourse does make it difficult to know where punk ends and the alt-right begins, their amalgamation remains problematic.

Beyond facile readings of *both* categories, a serious analysis reveals that although these groups often agree in their diagnoses—and occasionally tactics—the prescriptions they offer the world go in different directions.

Where the alt-right sees in neoliberalism, multiculturalism, and the waning of America’s military preeminence an opportunity to reestablish a particularly masculine and “libertarian” white identity, punk partisans go the other way.

Faced with a crumbling social infrastructure and atomizing surveillance state, punks—many of whom make no effort to hide their anarchist and socialist sympathies—celebrate not only feminism or the browning of America, but the decline of Western civilization so far as it signals an end to the dominance of institutions that have kept a boot on the throat of what philosopher Judith Butler once called the world’s “abject subjects” for so long. The Church, capitalism, patriarchy, American exceptionalism, and other ideological apparatuses have for centuries served as the source of such subjects’ humiliation, marginalization, and objectification, say punks. So have these apparatuses been punk targets.

In other words, whereas the alt-right has decided to blame the victim for the abuses wrought by political economy, even as it seeks to purify the very institutions that have failed its own clientele, punks have doubled-down on their solidarity with the poor, the LGBTQ community, refugees, and other abject subjects.

For decades, punks and their typically antifa affiliates have staged anti-racist events and lent support to groups like Anti-Racist Action and the #NoDAPL protests at Standing Rock, N.D., emulated the Black Panthers by providing free meals to the poor through organizations like Food Not Bombs, and Punks with Lunch, and led the charge against economic inequality by almost single-handedly founding Occupy Wall Street.

Given such facts, to what end is the intelligentsia conflating punk and the alt-right?

Remembering that fascists have been co-opting the radical left's aesthetics and practices for a century—a fact that lets journalists off the hook for perhaps as long as it takes to hear a punk song—it goes without saying that the news establishment's association of the two serves to undermine and further marginalize both camps, but punk especially.

That the mainstream media is generally committed to denouncing Nazism in its most explicit iterations, so far as it offends its own vaguely "liberal" sensitivities, is self-evident. By throwing punk into the equation, however, the press gets a twofer: it can condemn Nazis and deprecate the really-existing anarchism of, say, an all-ages punk show staged in a worker-owned Infoshop in one fell swoop, protecting its revenue stream by reassuring its advertisers of its commitment to the market.

We should always beware such a maneuver. Not only does it hardly damage the fascism it claims to oppose, but repeating the fallacy that those who fight Nazis are as deplorable as Nazis isolates further those most committed to opposing fascism.

Such at least is the lesson of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, the 1938 memoir wherein the author, who was antifa before it was hip, recalls his days fighting in the Spanish Civil War.

Documenting in detail the lengths the commercial press went to to yoke Spain's anarchist and Marxist factions to Franco's fascists, even as it admonished fascism in print, Orwell concludes that such a correlation was clearly intended to undermine the left specifically.

"The foreign capitalist newspapers, in general, laid the blame for the fighting upon the anarchists," sighs Orwell, remembering too a political cartoon then circulating in Spain and abroad depicting an anarchist soldier removing his kerchief to reveal the swastika underneath. Although Orwell doubted such propaganda actually demoralized the radical left, "certainly it was calculated to do so, and those responsible for it must be held to have put political spite before anti-Fascist unity."

Similarly, when columnists today equate punk and anarchist antifascism with Nazism, they not only damage the only force equipped to combat fascism at the street level, but reinforce the spurious "fake news" argument Trump is so fond of repeating—engaging in actual "Newspeak" in so doing.

This, too, was Orwell's point.

Describing how conditions were so bad for everyone in Spain during the war that opposing blocs took to trading not bullets but insults across the front, Orwell concludes that the radical left's megaphones on-the-ground—which "explained to the Fascist soldiers that they were merely the hirelings of international capitalism, that they were fighting against their own class, etc."—prompted as many defections from Franco's army as bullets did casualties.

Had they not been sabotaged by the establishment press, that is, the leftists could very likely have kept Franco from power, preventing his nearly 40 years of totalitarian rule and altering the course of the Second World War early in its development.

Such is the situation in which the United States finds itself today. Should the alt-right take power on a more formal level this decade, and should what's left of our so-called democratic and egalitarian pretensions finally wither away in a more global conflict, there can be no doubt that the commercial news media will have played a role in making it so.

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