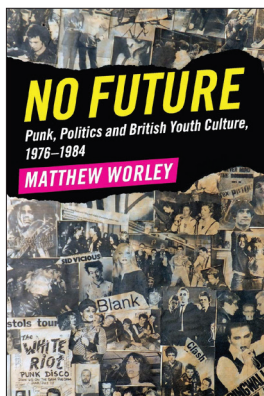


HOW PUNK IS RELATED TO POLITICS



Matthew Worley. *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–1984.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 414 pp.

This is a solid study of – as the subtitle says – punk and politics, and of how to place these two things in the more general landscape of British youth culture. Matthew Worley is a professor of modern history at the University of Reading, and the author or editor of several articles, edited volumes, and monographs on British punk. In his publications, he has very often explored how politics was present and was reflected through early British punk of the 1970s and early 1980s.

Youth cultures constitute a broad field of study, which started in its contemporary form at the University of Birmingham in the 1980s. To make a long story short, we currently have several existing theoretical positions that contest each other. The sociologists who started at the Birmingham school were Marxists and their theoretical approach included a claim that politics – especially class politics – is essential in the understanding of youth subcultures. That theoretical school is generally known as the subculture theory. The following wave of researchers, starting in the late 1980s and early 1990s, is known as the school for post-subculture theory, which criticised the stance of the previous generations severely – the post-subcultural school argued that youth subcultures should be seen as a lifestyle and a consumption practice in which politics and especially class play a minor role. Notwithstanding the fact that Worley is a historian, not a sociologist, he makes his position in that debate clear at the beginning of the book, where he states that “youth culture should not be understood simply as a model of consumption, or a product of media invention, but as a formative and contested experience through which young people discover, comprehend, affirm and express their desires, opinions and disaffections” (p. 2–3).

In his book, the author analyses the political stance in punk through song texts, interviews with bands, and participation in political events such as political music festivals. Important is also the historian’s work with the alternative press, so-called fanzines (combination of ‘fan’ and magazine), which – although started in the 1960s’ counterculture, rose to being a punk phenomenon. In short, fanzines are cheaply made black and white non-professional and non-official culture magazines that were and are usually photocopied. The main role of the fanzines has always been giving a voice to the youth cultures that the mainstream press has neglected. Punk fanzines started gaining momentum

when the British mainstream music press failed to cover the rise of punk in the 1970s. Certain people began to publish their own photocopied amateur magazines, in which they were able to introduce new bands and follow the already established music groups. Fanzines usually contain interviews with bands as well as concert and record reviews.

Worley shows how punk culture engages with politics on different levels. From directly politically active anarcho-punk and nihilist political bands like Sex Pistols or The Clash, the author goes to the segments of punk that are more than often neglected in the academic literature. First of all, the street punk or Oi! is very rarely portrayed adequately in its multiplicity. Worley shows how the political statements of rather anti-political Oi! bands were expressed through certain wording of their song texts or illustrations of their record covers (e.g., p. 86, 102, 242). Worley also correctly relates the political views of “punk-informed” revival subcultures, such as rude boys, skinheads or mods, to their first wave appearance in the pre-punk period (e.g., p. 103).

One of the most important contributions to the social science studies on youth cultures in this book is how it establishes a link between the changes in the mainstream media coverage, music business, and political situation in Great Britain. While punk as a direct reaction to Thatcherism is not very new, here Worley brings in a broader approach, demonstrating how Thatcher’s social consolidation process instigated a counter-reaction in punk, to preserve the right to be different. In the last but one chapter of the book Worley explores how the mainstream music business captured the political activism of alternative groups and watered it down. Here he focuses on Band Aid, a collective musical action of the practically most important mainstream pop stars, actors, and their likes (pp. 250–251). Punk’s reaction to that campaign was militantly negative while groups like Chumbawamba depicted the whole affair as hypocritical. Here comes another eternal conflict within the punk: how to cope with the situation when the mainstream media, commercial music and music business adopt topics and strategies that are seen as an alternative culture’s territory. On the other hand, the book also discusses how changes in the media interest have affected the status of the punk music and its political stance.

“No Future” is an easily readable book and understandable also to the readers who have very little knowledge of punk music or research on punk. The reader is given a detailed overview of the phenomenon in Great Britain during the first decade of its appearance. The author explains very clearly how a youth culture is related to social and political processes and how the transformation of the general social and political climate is reflected in the new styles. What is sympathetic is that this book contests the black-and-white history of (British) punk, showing that the bands who were lumped together under the label

of “punk” had a very loose stylistic and musical connection with each other. There is also a strong connotation of connecting punk music and subculture with previous musical styles and youth fashions, showing this way that punk is related to countercultural concepts and practices of previous generations. The only criticism could be that this book – as the academic literature on punk does in general – focuses too narrowly on music, on how the resistance of punk was expressed visually on record covers, flyers or posters, and literally in song texts. A big part of the punk-involved youth was not in bands and participated in politics in a different way. The book shows, however, that youth culture’s politics is ambivalent and not clear-cut, as Worley says: “Punk’s politics were messy. They could be contradictory and formative; implicit and explicit; liberatory and reactionary. Meanings were projected onto punk, but also cultivated from within” (p. 253). It is very important to understand that it is impossible to pin down the ideology of a youth culture that has spread across the country and different social layers. There are always inner conflicts, discussions and debates. Apart from being a historical record, the book also demonstrates how historians can contribute to the research usually associated with sociology and literature studies. Therefore, the book under review can be interesting to a wide readership with different proficiency in academic research on punk. The book also includes a bibliography of fanzines and different types of academic literature. Moreover, a reader truly interested in the history of punk music finds in the book multiple tips about interesting bands and their releases throughout the first decade of punk.

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