Radical Musicology
Volume 4 (2009)
ISSN 1751-7788

Punk as Folk: Tradition as Inevitability, the Appearance of Subjectivity and the Circuitry of Justice

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Introduction

> Every wave [of punk has] its own time… Every time a hurricane hits town, it's brand new, y'know? When it hits you personally, you think it's the first big storm to hit the city, and it ain't; it just feels that way. And there might be another one tomorrow! So it was with music; I was very aware of what was happening that moment, not concerned with what had been before or what might come after.[1]

1

The romantic myth of the a-historical genius operating independently of all external influences is a powerful one indeed in all forms of music and art. The pretext should be familiar to anyone who has read biographical material on, for example, a great nineteenth century composer or a multimillion-selling rock band (Wagner, or Kurt Cobain, say): the tortured and/or heroic artist delves deep into that mysterious part of their subconscious to present the unpresentable – the pure subject. It is the myth of the deaf, dumb and blind kid who really does play mean pinball. As artistic rhetoric, it's fine. However, the critical problem with this conception, which we might reasonably describe as *the ideology of genius*, is obvious: it is people other than the genius – an audience, of whatever size – who affirm or preclude the assignation of genius, or of the status of lesser artist likewise. Hence, of course, the movement towards the scholarly counter-ideologies of the last few decades in which the author is supposed to have died and been replaced by a reader whose interpretation, we might note, will also need deconstruction if all structures are still to be postponed.

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The comments quoted above are interesting in this respect for here the romantic sense of creative thunder ('a hurricane […] the first big storm') is immediately deconstructed as a *sensibility* rather than an actuality ('it just feels that way'). Nevertheless, a search for *the moment* – that mythic but *felt* centre between 'what had been before or what might come after' – is clearly the commentator's desire. That moment 'when it hits you personally', it seems, is the moment when subjectivity appears; and though the punk commentator here acknowledges that this has happened before and will happen again (is part of a tradition, in other words), it appears that the wave, the (felt) 'brand new' wave, is at the heart of what

makes punk important to the commentator.

3 Every wave of punk has its own time; and though I do not intend here to give much in the way of a diachronic account of this series of waves, it is important to realise that, at least from the point of view of its own discourses, for the (collection of) movement(s) known as punk, the present – now – is crucial. Punk has been rather hyper-modernist in this respect: it not only wants to kick over the statues in a manner comparable to the Futurists, it also insists on 'No Future'. Punk wants to be about *right now*, in other words: a right now the right-ness of which offers a certain *justice* about which I shall have more to say later in this essay. Punk comes in waves, not ripples, or at least it wants to. Yet despite some rhetorical nods towards the heroic tendency within the ideology of genius, punk also, according to Mark Sinker, always wants to deconstruct itself just at the moment when it might build in strength:

> The purest expression of punk community may be the refusal to reach out, to express the desire that the community should continue, to set out obligations of duty towards its nurturing […] the micro-community must be taken to exist somehow by chance alone, never design. To want it, to build towards it, is to betray it.[2]

Folk – whatever that is – has one definite thing in common with punk: it means so many different things to different people in different contexts that it often feels impossible that the term has any central denotation. It is certainly not the intention of this essay to offer abstract definitions of folk or punk. Yet in vernacular discourse, these two descriptors are applied in ways that seem to suggest significant semantic stability: people talk of folk and punk, and feel a general understanding of what is being invoked. Below the sonic surface, these musical fields have certain strong correspondences, but there is at least one gross difference of attitude, nevertheless: desire for authentic reproduction of a traditional style, in the one case, and for hyper-modernism/originality, in the other. The irony, however, is that where one field professes to uphold a strict tradition yet is actually – *inevitably* – developing and altering that corpus, the other maintains a (modernist and romantic) tradition precisely in its ostensible rejection of 'tradition'. The desire for maintenance of a *pure* tradition, in other words, must always already be in frustration, on the one hand, whilst, on the other hand, the ideology of genius inherent to any modernist tendency is, by now, itself a centuries-old *tradition*.

4 Yet traditionalism and modernism remain categories that are felt to be meaningful in the twenty-first century, and that give a crucial structure to many evaluations of music. I am using the examples of punk and folk musics as emblems in this discussion precisely because it is in distinguishing between these fields that the romantic ideology of genius can be seen to remain pertinent in contemporary discourse. Consider, in this regard, a fairly recent letter to the *Observer Music Magazine*:

> Does music still matter? Yes, making music is no doubt something

> that new-wave postpunk bands feel like they have to do but what pricks are they kicking against? Doesn't this kind of music have to be doing something new and be saying something to matter? Otherwise there is no point. You are making something to a preconceived pattern. It is just handicrafts, not art.[3]

Here, then, we see a paradigmatic example of a distinction between folk ('handicrafts') and punk (or 'postpunk'[4]) central to the point I want to make in this essay. 'Doing something new', according to the letter-writer, seems to be necessary in order to be 'saying something', in order to have any 'point', and 'to matter'. For the folk artist or the enthusiast for folk art/artistry, however, such is not the case: it is possible, from the folk point of view, to be 'making something to a preconceived pattern' *and* to be 'saying something', that is.

5 The distinction here is paradigmatic, and the paradigm itself has roots stretching back at least to the nineteenth century. The surprising thing is that theoreticians have done so little to address the critical question, beyond the post-modernist critique now so widely problematised. This critical question can be formulated as follows: is novelty a pre-condition for some presentation of subjectivity? For the letter-writer, the answer is clearly affirmative.[5] Beyond vernacular discourse, similar presumptions also appear common, hence, for example, Simon Frith's recent research question 'Can Music Progress?' (as opposed to feeling the need to ask, say, 'Does Music Need to Progress?' or 'Can Music Fail to Progress?').[6] The purpose of this essay, then, is to challenge the paradigm at root by considering whether, perhaps, a flash of (inter-) subjective right-ness or 'now'-ness (I will call it justice, after Derrida[7]) might be possible *without* ostentatious novelty. In punk, ostentatious novelty has often been presumed as a necessary pre-condition for music and art to be valuable, hence its usefulness as a case for the theoretical point I want to make here.

6 In the discussion, 'punk' and 'folk' are emblems, as I have said. I use punk as the emblem for what is an essentially *modernist* tendency, firstly, because punk remains relevant to contemporary discourse[8] and, secondly, because of the punk tendency towards a certain pre-occupation with *now* which I have presented as hyper-modernist above. By contemporary folk music I mean, essentially, the self-proclaimed folk of the last fifty years or so, the post-war folk revival in other words. To clarify further, though I find a decidedly modernist value system in punk and a correlatively traditionalist one in folk, I do not wish to claim these values as the essence of either field; rather as tendencies in each. They are strong tendencies, nevertheless, with a very different implication of what one *should* say through the collective practice of music. It is likely that the paradigm under discussion (the idea, in summary, that novelty brings subjectivity) holds a far wider significance, however, and it is certainly not the intention of this essay to offer any detailed historiography of punk nor any particular insight into the content of punk music.[9]

The Rehabilitation of Tradition and Authority

Decades ago the theorist of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, called for the rehabilitation of tradition and authority. By this he meant that we should re-define our interpretation to include what is normally bracketed off as natural authority, the authority of good sense, of best practice, of exemplary model. In post-war folk music we find just such a sense of authority in tradition, a sense of the old styles and sounds as still having merit, and of the old-time singers as possessors of knowledge that remains worth knowing. Punk, on the other hand, has tended to see the standardised content of mainstream rock as the stamp of imposed authority and, from the 1970s onwards, has positioned itself against tradition at least in a rhetorical fashion. 'First wave' punk declared itself against the 'boring old farts' and claimed 1977 as 'Year Zero'. This was intended, in large part, as a symbolic challenge to a perceived wider authority. The more 'underground' forms of punk which have proliferated in the decades since have usually adhered to the same rip-it-up-and-start-again attitude. 7

The successive stages making up this procession could be labelled a tradition, strictly speaking. I would like to propose an alternative term from the connotation-laden 'tradition', however. After Gadamer, I would instead like to use the term *consecration* to imply fixity of content-detail, of style, of approach, of effect. We can call this consecration 'tradition' if and only if we are prepared to say that *any* consecrated act perceived as having integral value for the overall field is a 'traditional' act in a strict sense. Thus Jackson Pollock's extraordinary techniques for distribution of paint across a canvas would nevertheless be part of a tradition since, besides anything else, canvas and oil paint have been the traditional tools of the European art tradition. Since calling Jackson an upholder of tradition feels very odd, however, we might prefer to say that some of his practice retains significant consecrated elements from the practices of traditional art. Gadamer has written of 8

> the artist, who is "free as a bird or a fish" [and therefore] bears the burden of a vocation that makes him an ambiguous figure. For a cultured society that has fallen away from its religious traditions expects […] a new mythology [which] gives the artist and his task in the world the consciousness of *a new consecration*.[10]

It is clear from these comments that he has recognised that the avant-garde artist (*apparently* as 'free as a bird or a fish') must, despite a rhetorical urge towards a-historical rupture inherent to avant-garde ideology, enact a *passing on* of the basic structure of tradition which he re-names here as consecration.

I shall come back to this issue – the issue of something-like-tradition necessarily re-occurring in every event – when I discuss the theories of Jacques Derrida shortly. Admittedly, Derrida and Gadamer make a surprising coupling, bearing in mind their notorious mutual 9

incomprehension, as demonstated in a renowned 1981 discussion.[11] These thinkers do in fact share some ground, however, as will become clear. Given the tensions between novelty and tradition under discussion here so far, it should be obvious why Gadamer's term holds a special utility for my purpose: the question of whether more than three decades of punk constitute a tradition, in the normal sense of the word, could be moot; that some musical and operational details during that period have been *consecrated*, however, is undeniable.

10 In order to make this clear, it will perhaps be helpful to sketch at least some details of more than three decades of tensions between development and consecration in punk since its famous first wave. The 'original' explosive development of British punk around 1976-8 has been chewed over to the n^{th} degree in both vernacular and academic discourse, and little more needs to be said about it in this essay or anywhere else; for a general sketch think Sex Pistols, safety pins, spitting and Nazi-armbands: the image, in other words, that many people would think of as the beginning and end of punk. In fact, however, there was music called punk prior to this period, hence the quotation marks around the word original in the last sentence.[12] Furthermore, several music-orientated subcultures conceiving themselves as constituent parts of a larger punk underground have operated continuously since punk's first wave waved goodbye. Each of these later punk subcultures, of course, will have had many young participating agents for whom their wave was felt as the first big storm to hit the city. But in every case something of punk was pre-existing, just as any 'sub-cultural moment *x*' always affects all subsequent agency within a nominal bracket or genre/sub-genre category (let us ignore, for now, the issues of nomination and immanence that this statement raises).

11 Some examples, then, of post-first wave punk: the *anarcho-punk* of groups such as the authority-baiting Crass between 1977 and 1984; the *psychobilly* scene glimpsed in the UK mainstream thanks to a few hit singles from the Stray Cats in the early 1980s, but which existed primarily in its own sphere of labels, groups and venues such as the legendary Club Foot; the *hardcore* movement associated with groups such as Minor Threat and Black Flag in the USA from around 1982 onwards; the *cutie* scene often referred to as the 'C86' movement around 1986 with its promotion of a highly flowery, ostensibly de-masculinised aesthetic combined with constant references to 'punk rock' in the scene's principal fanzine, *Are You Scared to Get Happy?*; the feminist and occasionally separatist *riot grrrl* movement which developed in the early 1990s; the *industrial noise* scene with its system of trading cassettes, a consistent tradition at the edge of punk which retains great underground popularity today; the *post-rock* or *math-rock* movement of the last fifteen years or so, exemplified by groups such as Slint, Tortoise and June of 44; and other sub-cultural areas I could mention including *garage-punk*, *grindcore*, *anti-folk*, *techno-punk*, *emo* and more.[13]

12 Each of these sub-traditions relates to the larger tradition of punk, and

each has certain distinct properties of style and operationality. Some elements are generally common to all, however. These elements of consecration (in the punk underground, at least[14]) can be approximated as follows: firstly, the manufacture, distribution and exchange of recordings should be through independent labels in general and the DIY or do-it-yourself variety of independent label in particular; secondly, gigs, tours, publicity and other details of operationality should be self-organised, as opposed to relying on management; thirdly, punk groups should utilise typical rock band instrumentation of guitar, bass, drums and vocals (this is less the rule in the industrial noise scene, yet guitars remain prominent even there as tools of noise-production; techno-punk groups such as Atari Teenage Riot use sampled punk-style guitar riffs in their music); fourth and lastly, underground punk should reflect in practice the idea put forward by Patti Smith's 'Rock'n'Roll Nigger' in 1978: 'outside of society, that's where I want to be'.[15]

Folk as Punk

13 These four principles clearly create some form of consecration in the punk scene, and, as stated, all are generally found in any of the sub-genres of underground punk listed above. Only the third refers directly to musical content, of course, and even then only with regard to instrumentation. I am reluctant to give more detail as to what the consistencies of, say, guitar playing style might be, since any stylistic detail specified will doubtless have exceptions and exceptional variations. We can say generally, however, that typical aspects of guitar playing from twenty-first-century hardcore punk back to 1970s first wave punk are identifiable. These would be, for example, the dampening of the low strings for the well-known 'chugging' effect, the reliance upon dyadic power chords and the avoidance of the kinds of virtuosic blues-scale-based extended solos associated with pre-punk 'dinosaurs' such as Led Zeppelin. To focus briefly upon another musical effect as an example, the on-off kick/snare marching beat predominant in first wave 1970s punk rock – 'boom-chick, boom-chick, boom-chick' – can also be heard in anarcho-punk, in psychobilly, speeded up in hardcore-punk, slowed down in grindcore punk, thudded out with a degree of irony by the riot grrrl groups of the early 1990s, electronically reproduced by distorted drum machines in techno-punk and so on. Interestingly, this 'goose-step' rhythmic element is most clearly challenged by the math-rock groups of the mid-to-late 1990s, when multi-metered phrasing and polyrhythmic patterns problematised the idea that punk has to be music you can pogo to, though I know from experience that the math-rock musicians tend to have still considered themselves as part of the punk scene.[16]

14 There is an interaction, then, between musical content and the feeling of participants when it comes to genre definition. In theoretical terms, this creates a problematic murkiness: what *is* a genre or musical field?; who defines its boundaries?; can a participant within a field be incorrect when they say such and such piece of music does or does not belong within a genre?; and suchlike. Without wanting to get lost in these issues, it

should be clear from information in the last paragraph that the underground punk scene can accommodate some musical change and development of style. My main point is that punk has also relied on at least some specifiable consecration as well. Much of that consecration has been in terms of operationality – that is, how the music reaches its audience – as much as how it sounds, but certainly not all. (How music sounds is a rather important part of how it reaches its audience in any case, of course, but it will not be helpful to dwell on this point here, musicologically interesting though it might be.)

15 With post-war folk music, the core content is comparable. Returning to the four general ingredients of underground punk sketched a moment ago, this comparability is clear. Folk, too, is often released by independent labels, and frequently DIY ones at that; it also tends to operate through a grassroots network of mutual support where management deals are uncommon. Folk's shall we say *luddite* tendencies, its anachronistic attitude towards modernism and global capitalism, arguably place it just as 'outside of society' as Patti Smith ever was. Likewise, in terms of instrumentation, contemporary folk has a consecrated body of resources felt to be acceptable within the genre (as Bob Dylan effectively demonstrated in 1965[17]). The big difference between the two musics, however, lies in attitude and sonic content: where punk music often presumes that innovation of musical detail is intrinsically valuable as a challenge to a capitalist society, some key figures from the mid-twentieth- century folk revival – I am thinking here of Ewan MacColl, Bert Lloyd, Pete Seeger, and their followers – would seem to have held a view that maintenance of a musical tradition can contribute towards class solidarity and other forms of collective identity.

16 The important point here is that, in the punk underground, there is much talk of 'the community'; folk, meanwhile, is obviously understood to represent some communal expression. Yet the conception of community is not the same in each: 'we are the punks' means something very different from 'we are the folk'. There is insufficient space in this essay for detailed discussion of the political and counter-hegemonic ramifications of this difference, but it is fair, in general, to characterise the punk underground as anarchistic and the folk movement as socialistic.[18] Again summarising for brevity, we can further say that the anarchistic tendency in punk is towards small, insular, supposedly leaderless groups whilst folk music, by contrast, is often considered capable of expressing the character of a whole nation and, perhaps, even the whole of humanity (in the words of Woody Guthrie, to give only one example, 'Ever'body might be just one big soul, well it looks that a-way to me'[19]). Folk, then, has tended towards a Marxian aspiration for absolute social transformation and total justice. Punk, however, is sceptical of all large institutions and, in the most strident rhetoric of its underground wing, resists small ones too ('the micro-community must be taken to exist somehow by chance alone. To want it, to build towards it, is to betray it', the reader will recall). In punk, I suggest, justice is considered always to be fleeting, only to be glimpsed and crucially contingent upon an aleatoric right-ness.

What, then, might this tell us about creative agency and the possibility of presenting some appearance of subjectivity? If, for example, we follow the rationale which reasons creativity to be dependent upon novelty, will the 'micro-community' of punk allow more possibility for the feeling of subjectivity/individuality to come forth? Perhaps so; indeed the ultimate conclusion of the folk idea might well be total submersion of the individual in the group, just as the ultimate conclusion of Marx's communism is the end of history (no more need for novelty in that case, surely). But Marx's argument against this critique – essentially that communism would in fact allow the fullest individuality, rather than its opposite – should at least give pause for thought on this issue:

> In the higher phase of communist society, when *the enslaving subordination of the individual* to the division of labour, and with it the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; when labour is no longer merely a means of life but has become life's principal need; when the productive forces have also increased with *the all-round development of the individual*, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then will it be possible *completely* to transcend the narrow outlook of bourgeois right, and only then will society be able to inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs![20]

Clearly then, the knot of issues around novelty, community and self-presence have significant political implications, most of which must be left untouched in the present context. Limiting the matter, for the argument I want to make here, to issues of musical choice (to do something ostentatiously new or something based on a given structure) and musical purpose (what does my musical choice say about *me*?), I can clarify the argument so far as follows: I am certainly not saying that folk is always 'the same'. On the contrary, I will happily comply with the widely-held view that the kind of authentic performance of folksong prescribed by Ewan MacColl, for example, represents a philosophical impossibility; that is, to be someone else.[21] Folk has had to change and develop, just as (conversely) punk has involved the significant consecrations sketched above. Both fields combine tradition and innovation, but the impulse is different in each. The punk wants disruption; the folkie aims for continuity. In fact, continuity occurs in both, and must do for the simple reason that nothing comes from a void. Also necessary, I suggest, is a form of subjective interjection in every creative event: who, after all, could deny that the maker of handicrafts created something, or that the creation in question has some felt relationship with her personally? If, as seems certain, punk can never actually have the absolute year zero it claims to desire, by the flipside of the same coin it would seem obvious that the folk artist must bring something like subjectivity into play no matter how far their agency is, as it were, un-novel.

The impetus of this subjective interjection is wished differently in the two

different fields, however. Further clarification: it is OK for a folkie to perform; a punk, on the other hand, is expected to compose: but in either case, *subjectivity of some sort appears to be at work.*

Trace and Supplement

19 To theorise more deeply about this, I want to employ Derrida's conception of trace and supplement as a model of authorship under erasure. The model maps on to the folk and punk musics already referenced; indeed Derrida has suggested that something 'new' is, in fact, necessarily both consistent and ambiguous in any cultural act. Let us call it the *necessarily new* element. Is this necessarily new element at every site of agency (at every site of 'what comes', as Derrida puts it) sufficient to allow some form of subjectivity 'under erasure'? [22] Or is the appearance of a more ostentatious novelty necessary for the appearance of subjectivity/'individuality'? Before suggesting an answer to this, it is appropriate to offer some explication of two Derridean key terms.

20 The trace, as proposed by Derrida, can more or less be understood as the imprint of prior usage, the part of creativity which is passed along, the part which relies on earlier tracks in the snow, as it were (the imprint in the snow of course being an *absence which feels like a presence*). Derrida argued that the trace has no origin and no presence but, nevertheless, is always in play and quite inescapable. For the other bit, the excess which is neither quite part of nor quite separate from the trace, Derrida offers the term translated into English as *supplementarity*. Though Derrida critiques the 'Logic of Supplementarity' as it occurs in, for example, Rousseau, it is a crucial component of his theory; indeed, his objection to Rousseau, in particular, is primarily with regard to the latter's fundamental belief in an original communication ('self-present speech') which could have existed before 'that dangerous supplement' of writing. Derrida's theory of supplementarity, then, is certainly tied into an interest in the idea of subjectivity but, given his accompanying theory of the trace, is also a problematisation of the idea of subjectivity (and objectivity, indeed, since he declares emphatically that 'the (pure) trace does not exist'). [23]

21 Many critics, admittedly, have presumed that deconstruction involves the absolute disappearance of the subject. By his own account, however, Derrida never intended to con us with any such destruction through deconstruction:

> I don't destroy the subject […] I situate it […] I believe that at a certain level one cannot get along without the notion of the subject. It is a question of knowing where it comes from and how it functions. [24]

The function to which Derrida is referring here is between trace and supplement. It is not between 'origin' and 'subjective addition', for these terms are barred within Derridean theory, but – to still put it reductively,

but to allow a short-hand for the 'function' of which Derrida speaks – the 'notion of the subject' occurs, I would argue, between discursive felt-meaning and meta-discursive developed-meaning.[25] To apply this to the cases under discussion: the punks of 1977, in their outrageous clothing and apparently hostile music, screamed *I am me*, I am outside, I am an original. As in the film, *The Life of Brian*, they soon found they had a growing gang of like-minded 'individuals' to accompany them (with each gang of individuals inspiring new, younger 'generations' of gangs of individuals to assert a perceived-to-be-necessary novelty – the smidgeon of difference – in order to present ostentatiously a new group 'individuality'). By contrast, most folksingers of any period don't scream, they soothe us with a song which, to quote Bob Dylan,

> has over a thousand faces and you must meet them all if you want to play this stuff. A folk song might vary in meaning and it might not appear the same from one moment to the next. It depends on who's playing and who's listening.[26]

The circuitry here is different. Punk's search for individuality, like all such modernist gestures at least since the Futurists, had to fail precisely because the pure subject is impossible, is unthinkable (or, at least, is incommunicable). Instead, punk became a gang, with consecrated rules, and grew into what we can call a tradition. Within that tradition, there has been the constant need for innovations (several have been listed above) but each of these supplements to what we can call (impurely) the punk trace have resulted in further consecration (sub-subcultures, essentially, such as anarcho-punk, psychobilly and so on). The process is inevitable because the creative presentation of apparent supplementarity, in order to *be* presented, must be iterable.

Folk, on the other hand, knows it is based on reiteration yet, as Dylan points out in the quote above, it changes 'from one moment to the next' nevertheless. What is this change? How *significant* is it? For a simple measurement, we might ask whether the difference between, say, Britney Spears and Quasimodo is more or less significant than the difference between two identical twins. Whatever the reader feels is the correct answer here, it is surely the case that there is some significant difference between identical twins, is it not? 22

This significance is the appearance of subjectivity. It cannot not be in play, for 'I' is always in flux and, strictly speaking, is new each time it appears to become apparent. Derrida makes this point clear in his *A Taste for the Secret*: 23

> In fact […] one is faced with something [a]new [*de nouveau*]; I am always faced with something [a]new. I know that philosophically it is naïve to believe it possible to be naïve, yet at the same time it is absolutely new each time […] No repetition will ever exhaust the novelty of what comes. Even if one were able to imagine the contents of experience wholly repeated – always the same thing,

> the same person, the same landscape, the same place and the same text returning – the fact that the present is new would be enough to change everything.[27]

It seems certain, if this is the case, that a new singer of an old song can perhaps bring as much of their mysterious 'self' to that song as can the inventor of a new, unfamiliar style or song to his or her invention. In both cases, something is borrowed and something appears to be added (something necessarily new, strictly). Perhaps the quality of the added part, and the reason for its appeal, will always be slightly mysterious to us; my point is more that *to presume that the most expressive art will necessarily be the least familiar is certainly a logical fallacy*.[28] Circuits of communication are far too complex for such a facile argument to hold up; if the argument for novelty as qualifier of expressivity were valid, it would always (necessarily, and without exception) be easier to express oneself to a complete stranger than it would be in conversation with a family member or close friend. Certainly this can be the case, on occasion; but also without doubt, it is not always true: if it were, there would no longer be the need for friendship. In that case, perhaps, friendship could be replaced with some universal fraternity.[29] Whether or not such a moment would best be considered a 'glorious day', at present we can certainly say that expressivity and familiarity are far from mutually exclusive.

Concluding Remarks

If it is accepted that the appearance of subjectivity is not necessarily indexed to the degree of ostentatious novelty, does it matter if music shows no signs of progress? If, in other words, the folk artist's comfort with the familiar form prevails, could there be implications for the search for justice? Perhaps; for if the glorious day promised by Marxists should arrive, perhaps the kind of subtle appearance of subjectivity offered by folk art could prevail *without* the kind of desires for radical novelty embodied in recent times by the punk movement (amongst other contemporary cultural tropes). 24

Until such a time should come, however, it would be hasty to reject the punk gesture as being nothing more than bourgeois individualisation (the standard Marxist critique of anarchistic tendencies). Punk's regular ripples of ostentatious novelty, after all, have provided a contemporary expressive arena in which a certain interpellative call for counter-hegemony has been enabled.[30] For some of the punk sub-cultures listed above (especially the anarcho-punk movement), this has been explicitly so; but even in those areas of punk that are least obviously 'political' (the math-rock scene, for example), a crucial opportunity for self-presentation is made possible.[31] 25

Punk creates this opportunity by offering a trace framework beyond which each supplemental subculture can expand. (Its greatest weakness, therefore, is perhaps that – rhetorically at least – it refuses to value any frameworks.) The cultural circuitry of the scene is such that, when any 26

given new style develops, new bonds of recognition and solidarity are firmly engendered. The folk circuit, on the other hand, feels conservative and even reactionary when its tradition lacks any critical mass. In folk, that is, there is surely pressure to conform to tradition; but when the conformity is to a non-expanding minority, conformity becomes corrosive to the feeling of individuality.[32] Could we 'go back' to a time when folk culture was the only culture, a time when singing some ancient song felt just right and seemed to say all that needed saying? It is difficult to imagine so; certainly such a social transformation feels far from imminent.

That given, the punk gesture as delimited by Mark Sinker above, is an interesting one in post-war culture: in its underground form, punk has probably attempted a more consistently anarchistic solution to the problem of power in late capitalist society than any other subculture has. As Sinker would have it, this is manifested in an effort to *avoid* 'reaching out' and instead to allow the movement to continue only 'by chance'. His argument is not as fanciful as it might at first glance appear, for it is true that many in punk have consistently resisted cultural enlargement and have valued aleatoric communality highly (the notorious punk band Crass springs to mind, amongst other examples). In practice, underground punk has consistently searched for the new thing, has consistently promoted novelty and critiqued stagnancy in its rhetoric.[33] 27

What is it that punk fans and bands are able to find when some novel sound or some other element of apparent novelty is introduced? I would argue that it is a crucial moment of *recognition*. Punk's appearance of radical subjectivity, as a result, is only ever a glimpse for precisely the reasons outlined by Sinker: novelty allows punk just the odd flash of inter-subjective felt-to-be-equal relations; what I am calling folk (unless the glorious day should arrive) perhaps cannot. This flash of inter-subjective reciprocity and mutuality would be a glimpse of justice; the trouble is, its resistance to tradition makes it difficult to picture it ever being brought into a more consistent focus. 28

Notes

[1] Jeff Antcliffe, vocalist of early 1980s anarcho-punk group D & V, quoted in Ian Glasper, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk 1980-1984* (London: Cherry Red, 2006), 411.

[2] Mark Sinker, 'Concrete, So as to Self-destruct: The Etiquette of Punk, its Habits, Rules, Values and Dilemmas' in Roger Sabin, *Punk Rock, So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge, 1999), 120-139: 126.

[3] *Observer Music Magazine*, November, 2006, 8.

[4] 'Postpunk' is a rather spurious category about which the interested reader can learn more by consulting Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up And Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber, 2005). Though the category is not synonymous with punk, it is certainly fair to say that it is a modernist extension from the (itself modernist, essentially) 'original' punk movement. Decidedly hyper-modernist in the sense I have defined above, postpunk is as intimately connected to punk as the 'post-war years' are to World War Two, and is therefore analogous with punk.

[5] The same sentiment is also clearly articulated by Daniel Levitin in his recent and widely-acclaimed text on the psychology of music, *This Is Your Brain on Music: Understanding a*

Human Obsession (London: Atlantic, 2008): 'music is organized sound, but the organization has to involve some *element of the unexpected* or it is emotionally flat and robotic' (*ibid.* 111, emphasis added). For the folk musician, this statement is simply untrue, however: emotion and non-robotic pleasure are found in songs which have been sung a thousand times before, songs which lack any appearance of the unexpected (though of course, since we can feel differently about 'the same' recording heard again, all songs can potentially present the unexpected, even 'Happy Birthday To You').

[6] Simon Frith, 'Can Music Progress? Reflections on the History of Popular Music', *Muzikologija / Musicology*, Vol. 7 (2007), 247-257, text available at http://www.komunikacija.org.rs/komunikacija/casopisi/muzikologija/VII_7/13/show_html?stdlang=bg#_ftn1. Frith presented essentially the same paper at Newcastle University on the 28th November 2007. I asked Professor Frith at this presentation whether music could *fail* to progress, citing Billy Childish as a pertinent example of a performer who can reasonably be described as anti-progressive. The question prompted little or no response, however.

[7] Derrida has stated that '*there is an indeconstructible*, and that justice is indeconstructible' (Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 56-7, emphasis retained). He also makes it quite clear that 'justice as relation to the other' was at the heart of his political turn: see Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, tr. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 32. For detail on Derrida's precise ideas as to the nature of justice as relation to the other, see Chapter 1, 'Injunctions of Marx', in *Specters*, 1-60.

[8] Thus scholarly work on punk has been common in the twenty-first century, with a particular focus upon the fact that the punk movement has continued and morphed in the decades after the 1970s first wave, and that it continues still. For just two examples, see Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), which offers a picture of seven historically-distinct moments in punk's first twenty years of existence, or Alan O'Connor, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY* (Plymouth: Lexington, 2008), which examines the punk scene right up to the present day. Interestingly enough, O'Connor makes 'a guess about where [the punk scene will be] going in the near future', insisting that '*you have to be a bit different and not simply repeat the past*' (*ibid.* 87). Thompson's analysis, meanwhile, presumes something of a materialist dialectic in punk's progression through the seven scenes he describes, a model that causes him to make several factual errors. These errors are most likely made because, actually, punk scenes have been continuous rather than discrete; punk, in other words, is very much a continuing tradition in the sense that it has several core elements always present, and Thompson's idea that such and such punk scene critically 'solves' the problems inherent to some previous scene has little or no constitution in fact (his misrepresentation of the early Dischord scene being particularly problematic in this respect).

[9] Something along such lines will become available in my forthcoming Newcastle University PhD, however. In the meantime, the interested reader might find Thompson's *Punk Productions* a useful text, despite its occasional misrepresentations.

[10] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 1975), 76, my emphasis.

[11] For more on this, see Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

[12] The descriptor *punk* was applied to 1960s US 'garage bands' such as the Standells, the Sonics and the Thirteenth Floor Elevators. The mid-1970s New York/east coast US scene of post-New York Dolls bands such as Television, the Patti Smith Group and the Ramones, meanwhile, also was known as punk prior to the term's application in the UK.

[13] By 'garage-punk' I would gesture at a 'tradition' stemming from similar 1950s-idealising postpunk bands such as the Cramps and other 'psychobilly' groups, and labels such as Crypt. 'Grindcore' is a well established term for an intermittently slow brand of hardcore 'sludge', probably owing some debt to the later recordings of Black Flag in many cases. 'Anti-folk', likewise, is a term with wide circulation, perhaps best represented by Crass-admirer Jeff Lewis. By 'techno-punk' I mean groups such as Atari Teenage Riot and, to

some extent, the Prodigy which have borrowed demonstrably from punk in visual, musical and (perhaps) political ways, yet blend this with the electronic production methods and substantially with the sound of hardcore/rave dance music. The term 'emo' was used for many years to denote bands associated with Washington DC's fabled Revolution Summer of 1985, but morphed (in socio-semantic terms) within a less 'straight-edge'-orientated subculture into a catch-all term for moping teens clad in black between the 1980s and the present time.

[14] I focus in this essay upon the underground subcultures of punk because, in terms of consecration and tradition, mainstream punk is so patently conservative in sound and style: the caricature punk of Blink 182, Green Day or even Libertines, in other words, is so evidently of a 'punk' tradition that there seems little argument to be had as regards the critical issues raised at the outset of this essay. In the punk underground, by contrast, issues of rupture and continuation (and the political/philosophical issues raised by the tension between the two) are considerably more subtle and therefore more interesting for the present discussion.

[15] Patti Smith, 'Rock'n'Roll Nigger', *Easter* (LP, Arista, SPART 1043, 1978). The four principles/practices listed here will not necessarily all be found in each of the punk sub-genres listed above – for example, some strands of the punk underground have shown less emphasis upon the importance of remaining on independent labels whilst others might use an agent to book their tours – but they are a fair essentialisation of a general tendency in the underground punk scene. The mainstream scene of bands sometimes named as 'punk', such as Warner-Reprise's Green Day, certainly do have managers and record for major labels, of course; but their status as punk has been strongly contested by certain voices from the underground for precisely that reason.

[16] Dave Pajo, guitarist of one of the earliest math-rock groups, Slint, told me as much himself over breakfast the morning after his then group Aerial M had played at Newcastle's Riverside club in early 1998. Mentioning Minor Threat and the Ramones to him as examples of two bands about whom I felt great enthusiasm, he stated specifically that he too loved these bands and that everyone in Slint had felt themselves to be part of that punk tradition. In the current UK underground scene, the most obviously math-rock-orientated groups – Bilge Pump, Charlottefield, Polaris, Soeza – hold a strong connection to the more obviously 'punk-sounding' faction, with the very underground 'Leeds 6' scene of bands having maintained a strongly- and long-held articulation between crust/anarcho/hardcore punk and the more musically experimental side of the scene. The quite politically-charged *A-spire* squats in Leeds, for example, have presented gigs from many groups which can reasonably be essentialised as math-rock whilst Leeds's *Cops and Robbers* zine/e-zine lists local gigs by any band with a DIY approach to promotion regardless of musical style, thus by-passing the prejudice of punk-as-musical-style and instead utilising a value system that we can call punk-as-operationality.

[17] The incident of Dylan's use of an electric guitar at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival is notorious: accompanied by the harsh distortion of Mike Bloomfield's guitar playing and the rough and ready r'n'b of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's rhythm section, Dylan was booed off the stage after three songs. The appreciation of the audience when compère Peter Yarrow announces that 'Bob's getting his acoustic guitar' is palpable and clearly demonstrates the kind of resistance to variation consequent to what I am calling the process of consecration. See *Festival! The Newport Folk Festival*, dir. Murray Lerner, Red Distribution, 97 minutes, 2005.

[18] Again, more detailed discussion of this significant political contrast is forthcoming in my PhD research. In any case, however, it is not contentious to characterise punk as anarchistic and folk as very often socialist (and sometimes Marxist) in orientation.

[19] Woody Guthrie, 'Tom Joad', *Pastures of Plenty* (CD, Prism Leisure Corporation, PLATCD 427, 1996).

[20] These comments were written in 1875 as part of the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*; see Karl Marx, *Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1956), 263. The reader is encouraged to cross-check Marx's argument here with Derrida's critical treatment of the concept of 'rights'; see note 7 above. According to Marx (*idem.*), 'Right by its very nature can consist only in the application of an equal standard': quite the same argument as Derrida's, in fact.

[21] When, in other words, a singer such as Ramblin' Jack Elliott makes a definite attempt to present the performance style of another singer (in this case, most likely Woody Guthrie), the attempt is always doomed to failure. Likewise, Ewan MacColl's attempts to specify authentic details for folk performances could never truly capture the totality of the supposedly 'authentic' anterior performance.

[22] Derrida uses the term *sous rature* (under erasure) as a referent for something that we should not presume to be, strictly speaking, referable at all. For a rigorous and fascinating explication of Derrida's theories, see Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (London: Fontana, 1987).

[23] Christopher Johnson, *Derrida: The Scene of Writing* (London: Phoenix, 1997), 42.

[24] Séan Burke reports that Derrida gave this comment in a crucial 1966 discussion at the Johns Hopkins University symposium on 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' (see his *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 42). It was not, in other words, a declaration that Derrida would have tossed off lightly, although, at the same time, it is perhaps one he might have made more subtly in written prose.

[25] One proviso: the word 'meaning' has been used here under erasure, and in a very uncomfortably reductive way.

[26] Bob Dylan, *Chronicles*, Vol. 1 (London: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 71.

[27] Derrida, *A Taste*, 69-70, square brackets (aside from elisions) retained from the original.

[28] The word 'expressive' is critical here, certainly. It also seems certain that there is much interest to be had from examining, discussing and evaluating objects attached to this adjective. Such is not the purpose of this essay, however.

[29] For more on this general issue, see Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, tr. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997, 101): 'Among all the questions of number that should attract an essay on the politics of friendship, let us never give short shrift to what is called demography […] How far beyond a certain number of citizens can a republic still claim to be a democracy? If this becomes problematic well before the canonical examples of Athens, Corsica, Geneva or Poland, if this begins with number itself, with the supplement of 'one more [*plus un*, also 'no more'], what will be said, beyond the billions, of a *universal* democratic model which, if it does not regulate a *world* State or *super*-State, would still command an international law of European origin?' (non-parenthetic emphasis added). Derrida's suspicion of 'universal' models here can reasonably be read as a critical departure from Marx and Marxism.

[30] See Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971),164 for the crucial statement that 'ideology hails or interpellates individuals as subjects'.

[31] I am arguing, in other words, that the felt self-presentation enabled by unfamiliarity is crucially political in a strict sense. This unfamiliarity facilitates counter-hegemonic tendencies by keeping the dominant hegemony from being felt to be overwhelmingly monolithic; yet it simultaneously undermines existing counter-hegemonic work by implying that the established strategy (we can call it 'the familiar') is imperfect. The remaining communist/socialist left, at the time of writing, can be typified as believing in principle that *it is the dominant hegemony which is imperfect, not the familiar counter-hegemonic strategy*. If this is the case, the glimpse of counter-hegemony supposedly enabled by unfamiliarity would be counter-revolutionary in practice since it would weaken the possibility for the counter-hegemony to continue gathering strength and eventually displace the dominant hegemony (the Trotskyite/Leninist programme for revolutionary transformation). Since the serious left has dwindled to an impotent fraction of the critical mass it represented a century ago, however, there seems to be good political reason for the left to wonder whether familiarity breeds contempt. The glimpse of felt-subjectivity encouraged by novel micro-political groupings (e.g. successive generations of the punk underground) could hold a crucial efficacy precisely because it allows the hypothetical counter-hegemonic agent an essential purchase upon the potentially counter-hegemonic moment. Whether that glimpse can be held on to and developed into a new, universally just hegemony (the end of history, as promised so many times) or whether it is better considered an infinitely unstable and always aleatoric condition (to be striven for but

always allowed to go free just as it is glimpsed) is an argument best left to the anarchists and Marxists who continue to operate contrapuntally within the revolutionary left today.

[32] There are good reasons to argue that many 'punk' bands/scenes *are* folk in the sense that I am developing the term here: the content is firmly consecrated, whilst the need for conformity could be argued to spill over into something close to fascism at times (the *straight-edge* scene connected with groups such as Earth Crisis could be argued to have such a tendency).

[33] Even Billy Childish, for example, who is renowned for his *lack* of musical variation across a catalogue of more than a hundred albums, has at least changed his band names many times over the last thirty years. The Sex Pistols' first televisual statement, furthermore, was 'Get off your arse!'

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