

What about the Revolution?

There are all kinds of protest movements, whether over poverty and unemployment, the treatment of Aborigines, the environment or what have you. Revolution simply means that instead of "protesting" about the way things are run, these movements get together with an agreed common program and take over the administration of the country themselves to carry out that program.

In a crisis situation a large part of the population would be drawn into active political struggle. Already there are all kinds of community organizations demanding this or that, and in many cases themselves administering substantial projects such as welfare establishments, co-operatives, community radio and so on.

In industry things are less developed, but rank and file organizations are developing, and capitalism itself is trying to draw workers into the routine administration of their workplaces.

In a revolutionary crisis a substantial part of the population would be active in councils based on their workplace, neighbourhood or whatever and would be agitating for, or themselves administering, solutions or attempted solutions to the pressing problems society faces. In Russia those Councils were called "Soviets" although that word now has different connotations. In China there were revolutionary administrations in large "liberated areas" long before the nation-wide seizure of power and "revolutionary committees" also emerged in the 1960s "Cultural Revolution". In fact every large scale mass upheaval throws up some sort of democratic "Council" institutions, which have their roots in barbarian societies before civilization and the rise of the State.

Revolution simply means that the councils go beyond agitating for the existing regime to change things and actually take power themselves - not only in their own workplaces and neighbourhoods etc, but forming their own Government to implement the policies they want for society as a whole. No more petitions to the Tsar, "All Power to the Soviets!".

Or as the American revolutionary Abraham Lincoln once said, when the people grow weary of their existing form of Government, they possess two rights - their Constitutional right to reform and rearrange it, and their Revolutionary right to dismember and overthrow it.

IT'S ONLY ROCK'N'ROLL - OR IS IT?

Introduction

In a recent issue of the Discussion Bulletin you published a very short piece I wrote which quoted some lyrics from the punk band the Clash.

The article, which suggested that the Clash (at least) were more rebellious than the Red Eureka movement, was intended as a cynical side-swipe at our current lack of "revolutionary fervour". Some of the responses that it has elicited, however, are worthy of deeper comment.

The two predominant responses I have received from "communists", which disturb me, are:

(a) "Was that the one about punk rock? Yeah, they're really shithouse. It's all poxy music anyway!"; and

(b) "It's pretty obvious that you only chose those little bits that sounded O.K. and ignored all the rest."

It strikes me as noteworthy that punk rock is a topic which produces particularly undialectical responses from left-wingers. In fact, "noteworthy" might not even be the right word to use here. "Frightening" might be more appropriate.

A friend recently said something along the lines of, "Why is it that, in lots of cases, if you scratch a communist you find a fascist lurking underneath?" There may be more truth in that than meets the eye; at least

Only Rock'n'roll?

when it comes to attitudes to music. Some "communists" have the sort of fascist approach to music that creates visions of a socialist society where we are all condemned to eternal wallowing in the dirginess of Redgum¹ (on the basis that they say good stuff and you can understand what they sing). It's a pretty grim vision.

The Bias Exposed

The intention of this article is not to suggest that punk rock, as a thing in itself, is revolutionary (or perhaps even progressive). But then neither is rock'n'roll, soul, disco, folk, bush, blues, jazz, electronic, classical, or any other musical form. Not surprisingly, there are good elements of punk rock, and there is a bad side to it.

Is it really very surprising that, in writing about the rebellious side of punk rock, I would pick the progressive elements rather than the sexist or nihilist ones? I would imagine that anyone extolling the virtues of folk music for motivating people and promoting struggles, would tend to concentrate on Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger in preference to Peter, Paul & Mary and Donovan.

Left Wing Scorn

Why is it then, that punk music has come in for particular scorn from the left? Two reasons suggest themselves to me:

(a) Because some of the Trotskyite groups have adopted the opposite undialectical approach and embraced all punk rock with open arms (declaring its actual form, as distinct from aspects of its content, to be revolutionary in itself), some of those who consider themselves Maoists have opposed it as a matter of principle.

(b) Many lefties have been taken in by the media approach to punk rock, to the extent that they have believed that all there is to punk is nihilism, destructiveness and safety pins.² This contrasts with the usual scepticism about the mass media that prevails in left-wing circles.

In either case, the approach adopted by many in our ranks is, at best, unresearched, naive and undialectical, and at worst totalitarian and conservative.

Punk Under View (The Clash as examples)

All the examples that follow are deliberately selected to show punk in a favorable light. The anti-punk case has been adequately made in the mass media and, in many respects, it is undeniable. My intention is to show the good side of punk because, as we all know, there are two sides to every question.

In what follows, most emphasis is placed on the Clash. This is not simply because they happen to have adopted the most progressive political philosophy, or because I happen to like their music a lot (which I do!), but because, with the possible exception of the Sex Pistols, the Clash have attracted more attention than any other new band in the past five years. And it's attention which evidences their (if not revolutionary, at least) rebellious credentials.

For instance the American magazine Rolling Stone (Issue 316, May 1980) says this of the Clash: "Their first LP, 'The Clash', released in England at the height of the punk movement in 1977, has been hailed by some critics as the greatest rock'n'roll album ever made. Its fourteen songs

1 I don't mind Redgum, but if that's all...

2 All of these were (rather than are) significant elements in the emergence of punk, but it is too simplistic to leave it at that, as some of the examples below indicate.

Only Rock'n'roll?

jump from the record with such ferocious intensity that they demand that the listener sit up and take notice - immediately.³ But perhaps even more important are the lyrics. While the Sex Pistols and other punk bands viewed the deteriorating English society with a sort of self-righteous nihilism, the Clash observed it through a militant political framework that offered some hope. Certainly a long battle was ahead, they suggested, but perhaps it could be won."

The Clash have, in fact, a more optimistic view of the future than many of the so-called revolutionaries who so blithely dismiss them. "The Clash question everything, which is why they're so positive. They don't think it's hopeless. The Clash, in fact, believe we have nothing **but** hope. Just get out there and do it!" (Roadrunner, 6.2.80)

Basically the left have been far too slow to realise the potential of rock music to actually motivate people. It doesn't all have to be deadening and passive. To use the words of Paul Simonon of the Clash, "Rock'n'roll is a really good medium. It has impact, and if we do our job properly then we're making people aware of a situation they'd otherwise tend to ignore. We can have a vast effect!" (Quoted in Caroline Coon, 1986: The New Wave Punk Explosion, p64)

This is not to suggest that rock music can, of itself, actually change anything. That's not the sort of illusion that the Clash themselves would fall for. When Joe Strummer (lead singer) was asked about the potency of rock'n'roll to change anything he answered:

"Completely useless... A rock'n'roll group! None of us is going to change anything. Everyone goes 'Punk! Hurrah!' But in three years what do you think I'm going to be doing? What do you think the guys who buy our singles are going to be doing? I'll still be walking around muttering to myself. They are still going to be shovelling shit down some chute and maybe with their wages they'll buy the Clash's fourth album. Rock doesn't change anything.

"But after saying that - and I'm just saying that because I want you to know that I haven't got any illusions about anything, right - having said that I **still** want to try to change things." (Quoted by Caroline Coon, p74)

Rebellion as the Essence

The underpinning of the progressive side of punk is a rebellion against the status quo. (In the 70s the word "rebel" was almost superseded by the word "punk".) Sure the music they play is loud, raucous and often beyond considerations of taste and finesse. But don't judge it purely on whether it sounds good to **you**, or not.

Even the notorious Johnny Rotten had more to him than the "inarticulate sneer" portrayed in the media as the extent of punk culture. In Caroline Coon's book he gives his response to the hippy culture to which punk was, in many respects, a reaction: "They were all dosed out of their heads the whole time. 'Yeah man, peace and love. Don't let anything affect you. Let it walk all over you, but don't stop it.' We say bollocks! If it offends you, stop it. You've got to or else you just become apathetic and complacent yourself. You end up with a mortgage, watching TV with 2.4 kids out in suburbia - and that's just disgusting. All that's different from them an' those they were reacting against is that they've got **long** hair and bowler hats." (p47)

Progressive punk is an activist philosophy of rebellion. Mick Jones of the Clash sums it up with this brief response to the question about what he'd do if England started the draft again. "We'd start our own anti-draft movement." (Rolling Stone, May 1980)⁴

3 Would that we could make people sit up and take notice - even after some time!

4 And don't forget that punks played a major role in establishing Rock Against Racism in Britain.

Only Rock'n'roll?

So What do they Sing about?

The prime argument that was directed against my initial contribution to the Discussion Bulletin was that I had selected out a couple of sentences which sounded particularly good. For the benefit of the Doubting Thomases who posited this view, here are the contexts from which the two extracts were selected:

"WORKING FOR THE CLAMPDOWN" (The Clash)

... The judge said five to ten - but I say double that again
I'm not working for the clampdown.
No man born with a living soul
Can be working for the clampdown.

Kick over the wall, cause governments to fall
How can you refuse it?
Let fury have the hour, anger can be power
D'you know that you can use it? ...

"THE GUNS OF BRIXTON" (The Clash)

When they kick at your front door
How you gonna come?
With your hands on your head
Or on the trigger of your gun.

When the law break in
How you gonna go?
Shot down on the pavement
Or waiting on death row.

You can crush us,
You can bruise us,
But you'll have to answer to
Ch - the guns of Brixton ...

And just to throw in another morsel to savour, consider this:

"WHITE RIOT" (The Clash)

Black men have got a lot of problems,
But they don't mind throwing a brick.
But white men have got too much school,
Where they teach you to be thick.
So we're content, we don't resent,
We go reading papers and wearing slippers.

White Riot! I wanna riot.
White Riot! A riot of my own.

All the power is in the hands
Of people rich enough to buy it.
While we walk the streets
Too chicken to even try it.
And everybody does what they're told to,
And everybody eats supermarket soul food!

White Riot! I wanna riot.
White Riot! A riot of my own.

The Trump Card

In England at least, which group of people has done the most to popularise the "disgraced" Chiang Ching, Wang Hung-wen, Yao Wen-yuan and Chang Chung-chao? Some M-L group or other, I hear you say? Nuh-uh! A punk rock group who've called themselves The Gang of Four.

They've even had the audacity to set Mao to music (or at least a pretty good version of):

"NOT GREAT MEN" (Gang of Four)

No weak men in the books at home.
The strong men who have made the world.
History lives on in the books at home.

It's not made by great men. [repeated a few times]

The past lives on in your front room.
The poor still weak, the rich always rule.
History lives on in the books at home.

It's not made by great men ...

Finally, the Gang of Four may well have provided the definitive punk explanation of why they refuse to sing the love songs of old. The song "Anthrax" contains this monologue on the topic: "Love crops up quite a lot as something to sing about. Most groups make most of their songs about falling in love, or how happy they are to be in love. You occasionally wonder why these groups do sing about it all the time. It's because these groups think there's something very special about it, and always has been. You know, to burst into song you have to be inspired. And nothing inspires quite like love. These groups and singers think they appeal to everyone by singing about love, because apparently everyone has, or can love, or so they would have you believe anyway. But these groups go along with the belief that love is deep in everyone's personality. And I don't think we're saying there's anything wrong with love. Just don't think that what goes on between two people should be shrouded in mystery."

Conclusion

Punk is a musical form. The ethos that accompanies it is varied - though the media would have us believe that it is stereotyped into one format only.

Like anything else in society, punk is a mass of contradictions. That should go without saying in something like the Discussion Bulletin. Unfortunately, when it comes to punk music, many of us forget about the dialectics we so readily espouse at all other times.

Perhaps contradictions are, after all, subservient to taste?
