Punk and the Political: The Role of Practices in Subcultural Lives

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Punk and the Political: The Role of Practices in Subcultural Lives

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ABSTRACT

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Studies of punk subculture have heretofore focused almost solely on the communicative properties of cultural artifacts, neglecting the role practices play in creating and affirming subcultural identities and at the same time tacitly putting forward a conception of the political subject that is detached from day to day experience. In this paper, I attempt to reassert the importance of subcultural practices, especially those of cultural production and political contestation. Utilizing Foucaultian ethics, theories of the role and importance of spaces of resistance, and agonistic democratic theory, I locate the political content of Do-It-Yourself punk in the day-to-day practices that facilitate the punk scene in an attempt to construct a materialist cultural studies.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Julie A. White

Associate Professor of Political Science
For Mom, Dad, Kristin, and Shannon
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Chapter 1: Introduction</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>My Story</strong></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>What is Punk?</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>What is Political?</strong></td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Structure</strong></td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Chapter 2: Cultural Theory and Punk Studies: Literature Review</strong></td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Critical Theory and Culture</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Cultural Studies</strong></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Punk Studies</strong></td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Sociological Approaches to Punk as a Subculture</strong></td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>D.I.Y. as a Cultural Field</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Chapter 3: Punk and Subjectivity/Subjection</strong></td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Positive Ethics</strong></td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Straightedge and Ethical Practices</strong></td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Straightedge: A Brief History</strong></td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Chapter 4: Punk Places: The Role of Space in Subcultural Life</strong></td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>A Punk Place: 924 Gilman</strong></td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Chapter 5: Punk and Democratic Practices</strong></td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Defining an Ethics of Democratic Resistance ............................................................ 146
Music and the Political: Mattern’s *Acting in Concert* ............................................. 154
Democratic Practices and Subcultural Life ............................................................... 158
Chapter 6: Conclusion .............................................................................................. 172
D.I.Y. Capitalism: Acquiescence or Resistance? ...................................................... 179
References ................................................................................................................. 184
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My Story

I went to my first punk\(^1\) show in 1991, when I was 14. A friend’s parents drove us into downtown Akron and dropped us off in front of the YMCA; I can’t remember who played that night, or much of what happened other than knowing I felt more at home there than I had any other time in my life. A year later I was helping friends book shows and working the door at local shows. Two years later I had written for a couple of zines\(^2\) and was traveling every other weekend to shows out of town. The few friends I had in high school were fellow punks; the majority of my friends were people I had encountered through the scene.

Punk also got me interested in politics. By seventeen I was skipping out on school to work at a socialist bookstore in Cleveland. Since I got my start in punk in the 1990’s straightedge\(^3\) hardcore scene, I was first introduced to animal rights activism.

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\(^1\) A note on terminology: Typically, punk is used as a broad term for the styles, sub-cultures, music, etc. that constitute the general subculture. Punk rock refers to a set of specific sartorial styles found in or inspired by the New York and London scenes in the late 1970’s. Further, hardcore punk refers to a version of punk emerging in America roughly from 1981-1986. Hardcore refers to hardcore punk after the hardcore revival centered in New York City in 1988-1991. Other genres of punk will be referred to specifically by type (for example: straightedge-hardcore, pop-punk, crust-punk, anarcho-punk, etc.)

\(^2\) Short for fanzines, zines are described by Stephen Duncombe as “noncommercial, nonprofessional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves”. Steven Duncombe, Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture, 6.

\(^3\) One will notice multiple spellings and capitalizations of the term straightedge; there is no consensus regarding correct usage. I will use the non-capitalized conjunction when referring to it, I will retain the particular spellings and capitalizations used by authors who utilize the term.
Later, as I began to venture out into different scenes, I was introduced to feminist, socialist, and anarchist politics. After an ill-conceived year at college, I moved into an anarcho-punk collective where we organized our local Copwatch and Food Not Bombs.

The 1990’s were a contentious time in American punk, the scene had split into multiple scenes, each with their own sets of political concerns as well as sartorial, written, and musical styles, from what in the 1970s and 1980s could be considered a unified punk scene. With the explosion of grunge rock and the following major label mining of the Bay Area pop-punk scene, American punk went back underground. While the hardcore punk scene in the 1980’s laid the groundwork for Do-it-yourself (DIY) punk, developing independent record labels and distros, zines, and touring networks of venues and places to stay, punk in the 1990’s began to define itself not in terms of style or music, but by the ways it was produced.

I remember long discussions sitting outside shows and in zines about the politics of punk. Was it punk to sign to a major label? Is it punk to put barcodes on your zines or records? Can you have leftist politics and participate in the culture industry? We began to see our lives inside and outside the punk subculture as political acts. At the same time, Riot Grrrl was seeking to create space in punk for women to participate in punk; punk shows became sites of contestation between men and women. Queercore was emerging at the same time, creating space for queerness in punk, which (especially in scenes derived from hardcore punk) was, and still is, largely inhabited by young straight men.

I can chart a line, albeit a long crooked line, from my first punk show to where I am now. No part of my life has been untouched by it; it has played a significant role in
how I understand not just politics, but my personal interactions with others and the way I understand and experience the world. Yet I don’t see this reflected in academic literature. With few exceptions, the way punk is produced and lived is largely ignored in favor of discussions that focus on the outward expressions of punk, a tendency that is common in discussions of culture and the ways it interacts with politics. Since I’ve never been in a band and don’t particularly look punk, punk studies specifically and cultural studies in general by and large don’t talk about my experiences or those of my friends within the scene.

Punk is political. A relatively benign statement on its own, it contains within it multiple assumptions regarding the connection between culture and politics. It implies a unity, an essential quality or set of qualities that constitutes both the terms punk and political. It is at once a declaration and a plea; it is at once an assertion that punk is political and a plea that one considers the possibility of culture being a potential site of politics. It leaves open discursive space to consider what it is that makes punk political, yet at the same time relies on an understanding of what makes culture political derived largely from the move in cultural studies to expand the notion of what is considered political. It also assumes coherence in a notion of politics as a stable concept.

In fact, there is nothing benign about the statement that punk is political; it threatens the hegemony of cultural studies in discussing the politics of culture and at the same time points a finger at normative political theory for abandoning culture as a site of the political. Punk, the production of which is central to its identity, can only be half
explained in terms of cultural studies, which for reasons that will be discussed below limits the political to the cultural text or artifact. Punk is at once an art form and subculture, cultural studies can only account for the former, the later is either ignored or transformed into a text at the expense of phenomena which could be conceptualized as political or politicizing.

Sociological studies of punk as a subculture address the shortcomings of cultural studies by analyzing the role of practices in the creation of alternative cultures, but either ignore the politics of punk entirely or draw on cultural studies when speaking of politics, moving the focus from individual participants to the utterances of punk products. Practices are studied for their function in creating and maintaining both the subculture and the participant, the potential for creating or transforming the political subject are largely neglected. However, there is left open a possibility of reading subcultural practices as functioning to create political subjects.

The statement that punk is political carries with it an air of trepidation; it is a declaration and a plea simultaneously. It seems almost petulant; as though it knows itself as political yet must ask permission to be considered so by normative political theory. It at once seeks legitimacy and resents having to ask. If culture were truly considered a legitimate site of political contestation and therefore study, the statement would not be necessary. Normative political theory was not always so dismissive of culture, premodern and conservative political philosophers understood culture as an integral part of politics, creating political subjects and the field upon which they can identify with each other. It is not until liberalism and the Enlightenment that culture is cordoned off from
politics; if there is a part of the self that exists prior to lived experience or material reality there is little reason to consider culture except as a possible impediment to reasoned political decision-making. Culture is exiled from the public into the private sphere. In fact, it will be argued below that it is a residue of this Enlightenment thinking in Marxian philosophy that limits cultural studies from considering practices as political. Texts can be laid upon the cogito; practices get the cogito’s hands dirty.

It is my contention that in order to say that punk is political, one must seek a synthesis of cultural theory, sociological studies of cultural fields and subcultures, and normative political theory. Cultural practices have the potential to become constitutive of the political subject, that is to say the subject is created within and constituted by culture. If there is a possibility of punk being a site of progressive politics, it is not only by the subject speaking through culture, but by the practices necessary to create and maintain punk as a continuing entity shaping the individual as a political actor.

While the scope of this paper is limited to punk, it is not the limit of this line of study; it is my contention that it is not only possible to study subcultures in this way, but the dominant order as well. If political actors are created within subcultures, then it follows that political actors are created within mainstream culture; it is no surprise that a culture based around a consumerism promulgated by capitalism will create subjects that are inclined to be consumers. Punk is being studied because it makes the connection between practices and politics explicit; it might be equally enlightening, speaking exclusively of subcultures based around music, to study the ways practices shape the
politics of participants in hip-hop or heavy metal cultures; it is my argument that the way each is structured would result in particular sorts of politics and political subjects.

What is Punk?

While the mainstream media, and many academicians, have attempted to create a precise definition of punk, as Roger Sabin states, “’punk’ is a notoriously amorphous concept…at a very basic level, we can say that punk was/is a subculture best characterized as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement. It had its high point from 1976-1979, and was most visible in Britain and America.”

Hardcore punk, punk’s second incarnation, took place between 1981-1986 in America. Stacy Thompson refers to seven major punk scenes, “the New York Scene, the English Scene, the California Hardcore Scene, the Washington DC scene, the New York Second Wave Straight Edge [also referred to as the Youth Crew scene, or the second hardcore revival] scene, the Riot Grrrl Scene, and the Berkeley/Lookout! Pop-punk scene.”

Thompson is right to locate scenes geographically, stylistically, and chronologically, but one must take care not to overemphasize these sorts of boundaries. While the New York punk scene of the 1970’s, the London scene, and the California scene each have assigned to it specific styles and practices, the Riot Grrrl scene emerged in Olympia, WA and Washington DC simultaneously, and the New York Second Wave Straight Edge scene quickly expanded to smaller scenes across the country, developing

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5 Blush, American Hardcore, 9.
6 Thompson, Punk Productions: Unfinished Business, 9.
7 Klein, “Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community,” 212., Garofalo and Rosenberg, “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,” 809-810.
new styles, both musically and sartorially, as time went on. The Washington DC scene is particularly interesting; since it played a role not only in hardcore punk, but the birth of the straightedge, riot grrrl, and emo scenes.8

This work will focus at once on punk as a whole and the ways it is conceptualized within academic discourse, with particular focus on punk in the 1990’s. Matula describes the nineties thusly:

For punk rock, the 1990s were a watershed and a nightmare. The mainstream commercial success in that decade of bands like Green Day, Rancid, and Blink 182 was unprecedented for a genre that survived the Reagan-Bush era on $3 concerts, indie labels, and the relatively limited broadcast range of college radio. But this success had a downside: the hyper-commercializing and mainstreaming of punk, fast on the heels of the majors’ “discovery” of grunge and their search for new scenes to exploit exacerbated the crisis of authority already endemic to punk…the popularization of punk was a serious setback. It diminished and co-opted punk’s political message and, by encouraging self-marginalization as a counter-hegemonic strategy, exacerbated the tensions between

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8 Andersen and Jenkins, *Dance of Days*. 
community and alienation that have always been lurking just below the surface in punk.\textsuperscript{9}

In response to the corporate mining of punk, the scene drew away from sight, becoming more difficult, for example the move from second wave straightedge to metalcore\textsuperscript{10} and at the same time shifting away from self-definition in terms of music to practices and production. Punk shifted from privileging textual resistance to privileging a resistance based on the practices and productions that constituted DIY culture. At the same time, this move underground necessitated increased interactions between different scenes, each with particular forms and conceptualizations of politics. Riot Grrrls and anarcho-punks, straightedgers and pop-punks shared many of the same spaces, punk was no longer a site of resistance, but a site of contesting resistances. Emo emerged in part out of this conflict, beginning as a diverse set of responses to both the excessive masculinity and violence of the punk scene, the Riot Grrrl critique of punk, and the commercialization of pop-punk; geographically and chronologically diffuse (first emerging in Washington DC during revolution summer)\textsuperscript{11}, it was to become the next genre of punk to be mined, a version of it becoming popular in the 2000s.\textsuperscript{12}

Punk exists both as a collection of texts and a collection of practices and quasi-institutions. In both the popular imagination and academic literature, punk is most often seen as a musical and sartorial style; this is certainly understandable considering the

\textsuperscript{9} Matula, “Pow! To the People: The Make-Up’s Reorganization of Punk Rhetoric,” 19-20.
\textsuperscript{10} Haenfler, \textit{Straigtedge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change}, 16.
\textsuperscript{11} Andersen and Jenkins, \textit{Dance of Days}.
\textsuperscript{12} Greenwald \textit{Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo}. 
spectacle of punk music and fashion. However, this misses a great deal of what happens within punk subculture. Kevin Mattson claims that, “Part of the reason that the element of production in this subculture has been overlooked is that it can be hard to document. Cultural critics often overlook ‘underground’ cultural practices that are hard to uncover” which leads to an overemphasis on style.13 Mattson’s article also points out another issue in defining punk, that of chronological boundaries. Is punk dead? It’s a constant source of controversy, in titling his piece, “Did Punk Matter?”, Mattson tacitly is arguing that punk has a definite end. However, punk subculture continues on, so I’ll operate on the assumption that it still exists, despite the parochialism and claims to authenticity of previous generations of punks.

If punk is too often limited only to style, what is missing? Stacy Thompson conceptualizes the textual fields as, “music (recorded and performed), style (especially clothing), the printed word (including fanzines, or ‘zines’), cinema, and events (punk happenings aside from shows); together, these texts make up the ‘punk project’.”14 He also emphasizes the role of production in constructing punk as resistance to capitalism. Alan O’Connor expands this definition, “The punk scene includes bands, record labels, distributors, some indie record stores, punk zines, show promoters and places to play. It can even include cheap places to eat and local places when punks hang out.”15 I would add to these definitions that when we are speaking of punk, we are also talking about

14 Thompson, Punk Productions: Unfinished Business, 3.
15 O’Connor, Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY, 4
punk houses, DIY projects from making one’s own beer to making one’s on menstrual products\textsuperscript{16}, as well as certain forms of activist organizations like Food Not Bombs\textsuperscript{17} whose memberships and origins lie within punk subculture. Punk’s diversity can be overwhelming, not only are there these various forms of punk culture and practice, but there are multiple forms of punk, from street punk to crust punk, to riot grrrl and straightedge hardcore, but to name a few. Each has their own ideological conditions, fashion, and social mores, often members of different genres interact at shows or in the scene, especially in smaller scenes where one sub-category of punk cannot exist without the contributions of several others.

In addition to considering the artifacts, texts, spaces, and practices that constitute punk subculture, one should also consider punk as a social group. It means something to call oneself a punk, something more than just an allegiance to a given cultural form and style of dress. It is an immersion in a history, a set of practices, a breaking down of old boundaries and creation of new boundaries in one’s life that constitute for some a new way of living. Iris Marion Young posits a conceptualization of social groups as, “multiple, cross-cutting, fluid, and shifting,”\textsuperscript{18} explaining:

A social group is a collective of persons differentiated from at least one other group by cultural forms, practices, or way of life. Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of

\textsuperscript{16} Bobel, “‘Our Revolution has Style’: Contemporary Menstrual Product Activists ‘Doing Feminism’ in the Third Wave”, 344.
\textsuperscript{17} Thompson, \textit{Punk Productions: Unfinished Business}, 186 n.22.
\textsuperscript{18} Iris Marion Young, \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference}, 48.
life, which prompts them to associate with one another
more than with those not identified with the group, or in a
different way. Groups are an expression of social relations;
a group exists only in relation to at least one other group.
Group identification arises, that is, in the encounter and
interaction between social collectivities that experience
some difference in their way of life and forms of
association, even if they also regard themselves as
belonging to the same society.\textsuperscript{19}

She conceives of this move as a problematization of the methodological individualism
found in conceptualizations of groups as aggregations or associations, the notion that “the
person is prior to the association also in that the person’s identity and sense of self are
usually regarded as prior to and relatively independent of association membership,”\textsuperscript{20}
arguing instead that

Groups…constitute individuals. A person’s particular sense
of history, affinity, and separateness, even the person’s
mode of reasoning, evaluating, and expressing feeling, are
constituted partly by her or his group affinities. This does
not mean that persons have no individual styles, or are
unable to transcend or reject group identity. Nor does it

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 43.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 44-45.
preclude persons from having many aspects that are independent of these group identities.\textsuperscript{21} Young’s conception of social groups allows for the understanding of punk as one possible group membership that has the potential to shape, in part, one’s subjectivity in conjunction with other group memberships. It also allows for the discussion of negotiations of group identity in context of members’ other group memberships. For example, it allows one to discuss the ways in which Riot Grrrls perform feminism within punk, negotiating multiple and at times contradicting, group memberships.

Conceptualizing punk as a social group situates it as one possible site within and without the individual where one can develop as a political subject. Punk is not an ascribed group, and is often entered at one point in an individual’s life and left as the subject enters adulthood. It is rarely a permanent membership. However, group affinity is experienced as a sort of permanence. Young states, “group affinity…has the character of what Martin Heidegger calls ‘thrownness’: one finds oneself as a member of a group, which one experiences as always already having been.”\textsuperscript{22} Group memberships are not permanent, and one finds oneself entering and leaving certain groups during the span of one’s life, while perhaps belonging to others for the entirety of his or her life; it is the nature of the experience of group membership that doesn’t change. One experiences punk quite differently as one is entering the group than when one is actively participating in one way or another.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 46.
Since group memberships are contingent upon the recognition of and the difference between other social groups, it becomes possible to interpret punk as one possible site of resistance to mainstream culture. Explaining his conceptualization of resistance, Michel Foucault states:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case?...This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network.}{23}

Without resistance, power is purposeless, and vice versa. Punk, then, is reliant on mainstream culture to provide the impetus for its continued existence. At the same time, mainstream culture requires subcultures like punk in order to both define itself and periodically regenerate itself.

Foucault continues:

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There is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable, others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations.24

Punk, by its nature a diverse, contentious, and often contradictory set of sites, practices, and texts, can be described at various points in time as each of these sorts of resistance. Punk will not constitute a revolutionary subculture; its utterances are not proof of some coherent set of politics read upon it:

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with the mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized

24 Ibid., 96.
in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses
social stratifications and individual unities.\textsuperscript{25}

Punk is a set of cultural artifacts and practices. It is a subculture and a social
group. It is a site of resistance(s). It cannot be reduced to one of these things, it is
internally contradictory; it does not guarantee one type of politics. It at times works at
cross purposes; it is a site of contestation with the dominant order, yet at the same time
the dominant order penetrates it and creates conflict within it. Cultural studies reifies
punk into an analyzable set of texts from which a coherent, unified set of political
attitudes can be found. It neglects the contradictions of punk, the diverse set of political
concerns punk contains, and the practices that serve to create political subjects.
Subjectivity is sacrificed to text; instead of allowing for difference and periodic
unintelligibility and illegibility, it ignores them for an illusion of coherence that gives the
impression of stable politics.

What is Political?

In “Haunted by the Spirit of ’77: Punk Studies and the Persistence of Politics,’
Michelle Phillipov argues that the academic discourse around punk is based on,
“assumptions about resistance, subversion and political radicalism”\textsuperscript{26} that have lead away
from discussions regarding the particularities of punk music:

Their focus on the cultural and political ‘impact’ of the
movement rather than on the textures of punk as music has

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 96.
\textsuperscript{26} Phillipov, “Haunted by the Spirit of ’77: Punk Studies and the Persistence of Poltics, 383.
been the characteristic approach of most punk scholars, especially those working broadly under the banner of cultural studies. In much of this work, punk’s musical conventions are firmly anchored to questions of politics: that is, punk is often approached principally as an expression of youth rebellion and disenfranchisement, rather than as music per se.27

She continues:

Almost from the start, punk scholars have tended to assume that the genre’s politics are definitionally progressive and emancipatory. Despite enormous changes to the demographic make-up of the punk fanbase and significant generic and subcultural developments within the movement, academic approaches to punk have changed very little in over two decades of scholarship. Even with the visible presence of right-wing punks, conservative hardcore kids and avowedly apolitical ‘drunk’ punks in many contemporary scenes, cultural studies has rarely interrogated the continued validity of viewing punk as necessarily politically radical. Even obvious ideological contradictions, like the persistent sexism in a scene supposedly based on

27 Ibid., 384.
egalitarianism, seem to be reabsorbed into a framework which assumes that the overall predisposition of punk is at least ‘vaguely, if not always specifically, left.’

She goes on to argue that it is this foundational assumption on the part of cultural studies that renders it impossible to speak honestly about the use of DIY methods to promote racist and fascist skinhead punk and oi music that marks the failure of cultural studies to properly theorize punk music. She concludes that:

It is necessary to develop a vocabulary for talking about punk that can theorize its moments of political engagement without flattening the affective specificities of the music into a predetermined framework of radicalism. We need to find ways of talking about punk that take into account the pleasures and emotional investments the music evokes.

Phillipov is correct that cultural studies too often assumes a coherent, unitary politics within punk subcultures. Ben Highmore echoes this:

Within Cultural Studies a form of analysis has emerged that privileges an essentially active and resistant subject of everyday culture. From this perspective it doesn’t matter what kind of cultural material you look at because potentially it is all open to being used in similarly ‘creative’

28 Ibid., 386-387.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 392.
and ‘subversive’ ways at the point of consumption. While
the historical reasons for this approach can partly be
explained by seeing it as an over-compensation for a
previous formulation that took the subject of everyday
culture to be passive and easily manipulated, the result is an
endless search for the progressive within the dominant, a
search that seems locked into telling the same story time and
time again.31

It is my argument that the fixation of cultural studies on the text at the detriment to
practice is what leads to the difficulties of punk studies. Textual readings tend to lead
one to illusions of coherence of message and agency of speaker that, as I argue in chapter
2, might be endemic to cultural studies.

However, the failure of cultural studies and punk studies to present an accurate
depiction of the politics of culture and punk does not necessitate a retreat into
decontextualized textual analysis. What is required is a critical redefinition of culture, in
this case subculture, and the political. What is required is a conception of culture that
takes practices as more than texts, as subject-creating phenomena, and a
reconceptualization of the political nature of culture. Culture communicates messages, to
be sure, but it also serves as the ground upon which the self is created. Punk does not
communicate a singular message, but serves as a location for political contestation,
subject generation, and resistance; we must move a way from a focus on meaning to a

focus on the constitutive effects of doing, which would allow for multiple, shifting political understandings and motivations within the same subcultural space.

Normative political theory offers several possible means of addressing the transformative potential of practices; unfortunately, political theory post-enlightenment has largely abandoned culture as a legitimate site of political in favor of a more state-centered approach to politics. To but it glibly, when political theorists engage with culture, they stop practicing political theory and begin to practice cultural studies. However, if one looks at the conceptualizations of the transformative potential of speech acts within discursive democracy, or the role of habituation and education in civic republicanism, or the role space plays in facilitating the political, one begins to see tools that can deployed to create a new way of studying the politics of culture.

Sheldon Wolin differentiates between politics, which is the official, legitimate public contestation within governments that take as a given social inequality in its various forms, and the political, which are, “moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity.”32 While this conception of the political still relies on boundaries between the public and private, it is not as stable a distinction as one might find in Habermas’ understanding of the private sphere. Habermas contends that “citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion—that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions—about

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matters of general interest.” What is unclear, in this account, is what exactly the general interest is, as well as what exactly conferring in an unrestricted fashion entails. The general interest is in essence talk about universal conceptions of right, while leaving particularized interest in the private sphere. Particular interests could range from one’s ascribed or voluntary membership in one or more social groups, or from their economic positions. In order to accommodate difference in Habermas’ conception of the public, one must be able to shed those parts of his or her self that are particularizing. However, it is unclear that this is either possible or desirable; as one’s particular interests might be constitutive of their identity, that is to say, one’s experience of subjectivity might very well be contingent upon their position in multiple matrices of power in a given social circumstance.

It would seem then that we need not one monolithic public sphere with sharp boundaries between public and private, but multiple public places where people can share democratic moments. Culture must then be brought out of the private sphere squarely into the public, so that it can be conceptualized as a site of the political. This is not a new idea, Althusser, citing Gramsci, states in regards to the distinction between public and private spheres, “The distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law…What matters is how they function. Private institutions can perfectly well “function as Ideological State Apparatuses.” Critical theory has opened culture, as a site of ideological transmission, as a site of political contestation. Politics, then, will be referred to in this paper as the possibility of collective negotiation or

33 Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article,” 73.
transformation of interests, common or conflicting, in multiple sites, be they traditionally public or private, that takes into consideration and has the potential to transform the identities of individual subjects.

If we presume political subjects whose subjectivity does not exist a priori, culture has a significant role to play in politics. Barbara Cruikshank argues:

To put it a bit too straightforwardly, the traditional wisdom is that a stable and homogeneous political culture provides the foundation, as well as for the maintenance, or stable government. In large part, culture provides for the regular reproduction of citizens who are unified, coherent, predictable, and obedient. Political culture reproduces a governable population, a job that government cannot do itself unless it is willing to impose a unified culture upon a people by force, as both Plato and Hobbes were willing to concede in *The Republic* and in *Leviathan*.\(^35\)

It follows then, that resistant culture or subcultures reproduce ungovernable populations. The difficulty that emerges from this view is that it becomes nearly impossible to create boundaries between what is and what is not political; one can read almost any cultural institution or practice as a potential site of politics.

Jodi Dean discusses the notion of everything being political:

If everything is political, why does it seem as if our fields and opportunities have narrowed, dwindled, and become confining? Why does it seem as if there is no room to act? These questions point to the depoliticizing effects of the lament itself. The claim that everything is political makes action seem, if not impossible, then at least pointless—there’s no need to bother with organizing, consciousness raising, or critique if everything is already political.³⁶

She goes on to state, “Political theory and theorists have had a difficult time coping with the excesses of the political everything because they have operated under the general terms of a state-centered conception of the political.”³⁷ The difficulty may arise in part due to the accord given pluralism, the toleration of multiple social groups lacking a homogenous identity existing within given relations of power. If politics is expanded from government and law to culture, the potential site of oppressions, privileges, and contestations become almost infinite:

For cultural studies, the political everything marked by the decentering of the state has been a stimulus, provoking critical accounts of media, subcultures, consumption, leisure, popular science, and the rich variety of experiences, resistances, exclusions, alignments, subordinations, and pleasures inscribed into the life of the ordinary.³⁸

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³⁷ Ibid., 9.
³⁸ Ibid., 8-9.
The separation of culture and political theory is a relatively recent one, centered within liberalism, which posits a self that exists prior to history and experience. Republican and conservative political theorists, arguing that government was predicated upon a culture that supported it, spoke of culture as it functioned to create citizens. In *The Politics*, Aristotle claims:

> Since we assert that the virtue of citizen and ruler is the same as that of the good man, and the same person must be ruled first and ruler later, the legislator would have to make it his affair to determine how men can become good and though what pursuits, and what the end of the best life is. \(^{39}\)

Citizens are to be educated on the principle that “Men become good and excellent through three things. These three are nature, habit, and reason.” \(^{40}\) Liberal conceptions of the subject are predicated upon nature and reason being interrelated; they have trouble accommodating habituation, which assumes that citizens require development, rather than always already possessing the ability to be good citizens.

Cruikshank argues that, “Machiavelli, for example, held that it was religion that gave the Roman republic its good laws and good fortune. He understood culture and government to be mutually dependent upon one another for sustaining the liberty of a republic.” \(^{41}\) To Machiavelli, religion created good political subjects, “Thus, anyone who examines Roman history closely will discover how much religion helped in commanding

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\(^{40}\) Ibid., 218.
armies, encouraging the plebeians, keeping men good, and shaming the wicked.\textsuperscript{42}

Culture existed to unify the population, to create subjects that would be good citizens, as well as to facilitate the existence of the republic over time.

Rousseau argues in \textit{The Social Contract} that it is the prerogative of government, as the expression of the general will, to censor culture due to its power to support or to undermine the polity:

\begin{quote}
It is useless to draw a distinction between a nation’s morals and the objects of its esteem; for all this follows from the same principle and necessarily converges. Among all peoples of the world, not nature but opinion determines the choice of their pleasures. Reform men’s opinions and their morals will be purified of themselves.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

He continues, “The Censorship maintains morals by preventing opinions from becoming corrupt, by preserving their uprightness through wise applications, sometimes even fixing them when they are still indeterminate.”\textsuperscript{44} Culture is the provenance of the state, since it dictates the ways in which subjects interact with the state.

To take culture seriously is to take seriously conventions, it is to place the state, as well as ethics and justice, in the world of practices. The conservative reaction to the Enlightenment is one version of this. In \textit{Reflections on the Revolution in France}, Edmund Burke argues that, “If civil society be the offspring of convention, then

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{42} Machiavelli, \textit{The Discourses}, 208.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Rousseau, “Of the Social Contract,” 141.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
convention must be its law. That convention must limit and modify all the descriptions of constitution which are formed under it.”45 Government is founded upon conventions political, religious, and cultural that constitute tradition, to Burke grounding government on abstract notions of justice and self is building government upon sand:

We know, and it is our pride to know, that man is by his constitution a religious animal; that atheism is against, not only our reason, but our instincts; and that it cannot prevail long. But if, in the moment of riot, and in a drunken delirium from the hot spirit drawn out of the alembic of hell, which in France is now so furiously boiling, we should uncover our nakedness, by throwing off that Christian religion which has hitherto been our boast and comfort, and one great source of civilization amongst us…46

Conservatism argues that it is in institutions that we find justice, not in abstract principles; politics is therefore grounded in the culture that produces it and it is impossible to separate culture from politics.

Culture is abandoned in Liberalism in favor a rational self existing prior to history or particularity. Locke locates the subject in a state of nature, “[It] has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm

46 Ibid., 453.
another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."47 Habituation and convention are replaced by a political subjectivity that exists prior to civilization. Kant severs the aesthetic from the political, the aesthetic becomes a value to the mind in its ability to access the sublime, but this has no bearing on politics; this is a radical change from Plato or Aristotle.

Culture returns in certain forms of Marxism, from which cultural studies and critical theory emerge, as means to explain why, if the conditions for revolution were there, the proletariat turned instead to fascism or the relative comforts of middle class life in bourgeois democracies.48 In a way, it is a synthesis of Enlightenment conceptions of self with pre-modern and republican accounts of the power of culture in creating desirable citizens. This version of Marxism posits a self prior to politics, or more accurately an authentic species-being that can only emerge after politics, that is kept from realizing itself through the creation of false conscious; the idea that the reason the proletariat is unable to bring about communist revolution is due to it being duped by the capitalist into believing that its best interests lie in the capitalist order. It is from this tradition that cultural studies emerges, a move detailed in chapter 2.

Normative political theory has been engaged with culture throughout its existence, and offers an understanding of culture as not only artifacts and texts, but practices that shape both the individual and the social. Cultural studies, while an outgrowth of one segment of political theory, has moved away from the idea of culture as a phenomena based around the constitutive aspects of doing, of living within and

48 Grant, “The Cultural Turn in Marxism.”
participating in culture, in favor of textual meanings. While conservative and republican understandings of culture are usually deployments of power emerging from existing power relations with the aim of creating citizens pliant to the maintenance of the status quo, it is not a stretch to understand the potential power of culture as a site of resistance; if culture has the potential to create desirable citizens, it is equally capable of creating undesirable citizens.

Structure

Since we know have provisional conceptualizations of punk and political and have interrogated the history of political theory for proof that political theory has a substantial contribution to make to our understandings of the politics of culture, I will set out the structure of this project whose goal it is to fashion a cultural politics that takes seriously practices as well as texts. In order to construct a conception of punk as political, I will begin with a review of the existing literature, moving on to discussions of punk and politics in terms of the development of subjectivity within subcultures, the creation of spaces amenable to political contestation, and democratic politics within the punk scene. Concluding this project will be an application of the cultural politics of practice on two phenomena: punk travelogues and the effect of the Internet on the punk scene.

Chapter 2 will be a critical literature review that details the move from Marxian critical theory to cultural studies, accompanied by works from punk studies that emerge from each. It will analyze the implications of the move from cultural politics based on conceptualizations of ideology and hegemony derived from Marx to analyses of culture
based on semiotics and the critical reading of cultural texts, arguing that the text has always been central to this line of cultural critique. This shapes the ways in which politics and culture are conceptualized and to a certain extent dictate the types of politics inevitably derived. Punk studies follows this same trajectory for the most part, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which these methodologies invariably leave out vital potential sites of politics.

I will then add a third axis, sociological studies of subculture and Bourdieu’s conception of cultural fields, both of which reintroduce practices to the study of culture. This will be accompanied by relevant texts in punk studies that utilize these aspects of sociology. It is my argument that while these works are a step in the right direction, they stop short of an understanding of subculture as at least a potential site of the creation of political subjects. At each point in this literature, gaps will be sought out where perhaps political theory has something to contribute. For example, while sociological studies of subculture pay attention to the role of practices in informing subcultural membership, the politicized nature of forming and maintaining boundaries is often left outside a normative evaluation of the political. By synthesizing the commitments of sociology to practice with the expansion of the political into the cultural that cultural studies provides, one might begin to construct an understanding of cultural practices as political in and of themselves rather than simply facilitating the creation of cultural texts and artifacts.

Chapter 3 will be a discussion of the ways in which punk can be understood as one way of creating political subjects. It will take as its model the positive ethics Saba Mahmood deploys in Politics of Piety, her study of women’s piety movements. Drawing
heavily on Foucault, who derives his notion of positive ethics on Aristotle’s emphasis on
the role of education and habituation on creating the self, Mahmood argues that Islamic
piety movements create a set of practices used by individuals to improve themselves as
political and ethical subjects.

It is my contention that punk functions as a similar site of self-creation. I will
look at the straightedge movement within punk in particular, which is organized around
the creation of the self as ‘poison-free,’ its participants creating a culture that eschews
drug, alcohol, and tobacco use as well as promiscuous sex.

If one is constructing a politics that takes seriously practices, the spaces in which
those practices play an important role in shaping the nature of those practices and the
politics that potentially emerge from them. Utilizing Margaret Kohn’s work in Radical
Space and Brave New Neighborhoods, Chapter 4 will explore they ways in which place,
both real and metaphorical, affects the punk scene. Punk, in a way, is a dispossessed
culture, one that operates in temporary, provisional spaces like the local YMCA or VFW
hall, yet manages to transform them into temporary sites of freedom and contestation.

In this section, the role of punk institutions like the 924 Gilman collective, which
has provided space in Berkeley, California for over 20 years, as well as other punk spaces
like Who’s Emma and various punk houses. Each exists as a manifestation of punk
politics, yet at the same time affects ways politics in punk is performed. Punk spaces,
permanent or temporary, serve as sites of contestation and community building; this
chapter will also begin to interrogate the role of boundaries in creating punk identities
and the benefits and drawbacks these boundaries provide.
Chapter 5 will situate punk within theories of discursive democracy that provide means of speaking of the ways in which speech and conflict can create and transform both subjects and communities. Utilizing Iris Marion Young’s conception of communicative democracy that both privileges difference and expands the sorts of communication that are considered political, Benjamin Barber’s conceptualizations of strong democratic talk and listening, and Chantal Mouffe’s understanding of agonistic democracy and the role of conflict, democratic moments within punk will be discussed.

In the 1990s, the punk scene witnessed an explosion of different genres within the scene, each with particular political motivations, which necessarily shared the same spaces. It was not uncommon to see straightedge, riot grrrl, anarcho-punk, and emo bands playing the same show, each bringing with them a certain type of punk who then had to negotiate the same space. Identity politics entered the scene, feminist and queer critiques of the scene emerged and came into conflict with the largely white, straight, male scene. Every facet of punk became contestable, from the price of CDs to the masculinist practice of slam dancing, which some women found exclusionary, overly violent, and a site of sexual harassment. Using discursive democratic theory, I will explore the ways in which politics is performed within the punk scene.

To conclude, Chapter 6 will attempt to describe a new conception of the politics of culture and the ways in which punk fits within it or resists it. I will also consider whether or not one can consider punk anti-capitalist. It seems difficult to argue that the style of punk was ever counter-hegemonic when Hot Topic stores selling punk clothing and accessories are ubiquitous features of every suburban shopping mall. However, the
question remains muddled even if we consider only the practices taking place within the punk scene. It will be my contention that while it might be inaccurate to refer to punk, or parts of the punk scene, as anti-capitalist, it may be possible to refer to it as a form of resistance to capitalism.
CHAPTER 2: CULTURAL THEORY AND PUNK STUDIES: LITERATURE REVIEW

Antonio Gramsci states, “The historical unity of the ruling classes is realized in the State, and their history is essentially the history of States and of groups of States. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political…; the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between State or political society and ‘civil society’.49 Louis Althusser refers to civil society as the site of Ideological State Apparatuses, “Churches, Parties, Trade Unions, families, some schools, most newspapers, cultural ventures, etc., etc., are private.”50 Culture is political, cultural studies as a whole is an attempt to describe the ways in which politics functions in culture as well as the ways in which culture functions in politics.

Academic studies of punk have followed the trajectories of the understandings of culture of both critical theory and British cultural studies. The majority of punk studies treat punk as a collection of texts, whether musical, written, or sartorial. In my experience, this is a limited understanding of culture that neglects the role of practices in constituting culture. Punk is more than its artifacts; it is also the site of myriad social interactions and practices, both within the punk ‘scene’ and between punk and mainstream culture and politics. For example, the punk ethic of Do-it-yourself is largely absent from most studies of punk, but perhaps for a single obligatory mention. Do-it-yourself punk claims that it is just as important to consider the politics of the production of punk culture as the political utterances of punk music, zines, or fashion. In fact, during

49 Gramsci, 1992, 52.
50 Althusser, 2001, 97.
the 1990’s, DIY became not only a means of creating culture, but also the central defining characteristic of that culture. We do not just read culture, we do culture; our interactions with the cultural are not just as consumers, but also as producers and critics, observers and partisans.

This chapter will attempt to draw out the ways in which cultural studies confront the politics of culture. The history of cultural studies will be charted as it moves from a Marxian endeavor seeking to explain the role of culture as it functions within the ideological superstructure of capitalism, to Cultural Studies, which seeks to find emancipatory political potential in particular readings of culture through semiotics. Since punk studies in some ways follows the movement of cultural studies, several works discussing the politics of punk will be set upon this axis from Marx to semiotics. As these axes are constructed, advantages and disadvantages of each perspective will be drawn out as they construct politics, culture, and punk, while paying particular attention to the gaps in which one could consider practices and social relationships.

Critical Theory and Culture

In “The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas”, Marx and Engels posit that the ideas of the ruling class are an expression of the manifestation of economic relations. The ruling class will attempt to obfuscate this relationship between ideas and material reality and naturalize these ideas, which are then claimed to be the underpinning for material reality. In this way, ruling ideals have a dual role, they not only support the current state of affairs, but they stand as surrogate for and at the same time hide, the material reality that is expressing itself. One means by which ruling ideas naturalize themselves is by
embedding themselves in culture.\textsuperscript{51} Marxian conceptions of base/superstructure problematize cultural rebellion/resistance. On one hand, the production of resistant culture is a sort of reclamation of the means of production, in that one can labor in part of their lives as a species-being. On the other hand, it is unclear that the creation of alternative cultural productions is not simply the creation of a new petit-bourgeoisie, a class with no revolutionary potential, according to Marx. On the other hand, DIY and punk subculture reconnect culture with capitalism, as it makes central to its existence the role that material reality plays in the ideas created within culture.

Gramsci adds to this conception of ruling ideas the notion of hegemony, which holds that the ruling class rules not only by force, but also by force of ideas, “a social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to ‘liquidate’, or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups.”\textsuperscript{52} Bourgeois society is divided into two spheres, the public and the private; the public comprised of the state, the public by the economy, the church, the educational system, culture, and so on. The great deception of capitalism is locating the economic base, from which all other ideology emerges, in the private sphere, cordoned off from the political.

According to Gramsci, any antagonistic social group must first lead before it gains power; it must become ‘common sense’ before it becomes real in terms of control of the state.\textsuperscript{53} He states, “to the extent that ideologies are historically necessary they have a validity which is ‘psychological’; they ‘organize’ human masses, and create the terrain

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Marx, “The Ruling Class and the Ruling Ideas,” 9-10.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Gramsci, \textit{Prison Notebooks}, 57.
\item \textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.”  
Resistant or revolutionary culture would then offer a vision of the world that made class struggle seem natural; it would only then be the case that workers would band together. One of the difficulties of hegemony, at least in terms of late capitalism, is that a certain amount of diversity and irreverence is almost expected. The superstructure is not a monolith that can be felled, instead it is a web of contrasting and often contradicting ideas that serve to at once buttress and obfuscate the role of capital.

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin claims that the mechanical reproduction systematically depreciates the ‘aura’ of a work of art, which enables a progressive reaction from audiences where previously there was only a reactionary appreciation of art. Aura is the authenticity of a work of art, its position in reference to history, value, and tradition; it describes a certain kind of commodity fetishism where a works singularity increases its value. He argues that new art forms like photography and film by their nature destroy a conception of aura.

Benjamin argues that traditional art forms engender a reactionary response, splitting the audience between criticism and enjoyment. A work of art is meant to be revered, not enjoyed; the masses are often criticized for enjoyment of art, which is emotional rather than intellectual. On the other hand, he describes the progressive reaction created by film as, “characterized by the direct, intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert.” 55 This enjoyment is at once fused with critique and a collective experience; the public experiences art as the public.

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54 Ibid., 377.
Art is therefore democratized, since the hierarchies between classes, between expert and consumer, dissolve.

Horkheimer and Adorno look at the phenomena Benjamin describes with horror:

By craftily sanctioning the demand for rubbish, the system inaugurates total harmony. The connoisseur and the expert are despised for their pretentious claim to know better than the others, even though culture is democratic and distributes its privileges to all. In view of the ideological truce, the conformism of the buyers and the effrontery of the producers who supply them prevail. The result is a constant reproduction of the same thing.\(^\text{56}\)

The culture industry to Horkheimer and Adorno is only democratic in that it allows everyone to degrade him or herself equally. Unsurprisingly, punks who are suspicious of mainstream culture often make this argument, though punk tends to be in a sense lower brow than the culture they critique. The authors are making the argument to the primacy of avant-garde art in cultural politics; its worth as revolutionary art can be measured by the discomfort of those whose aesthetic sensibilities are grounded in the market and its easy pleasures.

Horkheimer and Adorno, like Gramsci, see the functioning of capital located in the private sphere, safely hidden away from politics:

\(^{56}\) Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 134.
Everybody is guaranteed formal freedom. No one is officially responsible for that he thinks. Instead everyone is enclosed at an early age in a system of churches, clubs, professional associations, and other such concerns, which constitute the most sensitive instrument of social control.\textsuperscript{57}

Let us include in that list popular culture; while it does not share the directly social aspects of the other institutions on this list, it does create a landscape of acceptable lifestyle and expression. The state is no longer needed to create subjects through coercion or threat of coercion, capital and the superstructures it creates and influences create subjects who willingly submit.

In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, Althusser names the private sphere institutions Horkheimer and Adorno locate social control Ideological State Apparatuses. While the Repressive State Apparatus exists, it exists separate from the subject in capitalism, responding with violence to deviant behavior of those under its control. It is in this sense ever-present yet distant from the subject.\textsuperscript{58} ISA’s function by creating the terrain upon which the subject finds herself, much like Gramsci’s notion of hegemony. Power in the public sphere exists as a spectre; the political, as it exists as a subject creating process, is located in the private sphere, safely removed from contestation.

People create ideologies and are at the same time created by them, “the category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid. 149, 
\textsuperscript{58}Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” 96.
that the category of the subject is only constitutive of ideology insofar as all ideology has
the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects.”59

Ideology creates subjects out of individuals through what Althusser calls interpellation,
which is the process of calling and recognition between subjects. One internalizes
ideology such that the ways in which one experiences their own subjectivity is contingent
upon their position in a web of multiple interpellating relationships with others,
institutions, and their own selves. Though individuals are constantly interacting with
ISA’s, transforming from individuals into subjects, it must not be forgotten that we are
“always already subjects.”60 We do not ever exist outside ideology; we are not introduced
into it. Rather, this process should be seen of a constant renewal of state power
internalized in the subject, at odds with our existence as individuals. We do not become
subjects, we are always subject and individual, interpellation is a mechanism that enables
the continued dominance of the subject, and the external reality that informs and
constitutes it, over the individual.

Marxian cultural studies opens up the private sphere to political contestation,
since it is in the private sphere that material reality exists in the form of the economic
base. Superstructure is also located in the private, with the exception of the state, whose
elevation above other superstructural institutions is a deployment of the power of capital
to mask its true functioning. In this reading, the cultural is as much a site of political
activity, insofar as it exists as a subject producing institutions, as is the state. In fact, it
could be argued that it is more important than the state, in that it exists within and without

59 Ibid., 116.
60 Ibid. 118.
the subject, constituting that very subjectivity. The state exists separate from the subject as an largely absent father, interacting with the subject only in the negative, it stops activity; culture shapes the subject by disciplining it. The state is negative, culture and other ISA’s are positive institutions, in that they create the rituals through which the subject in capitalism is created.

The limit of this interpretation of culture, beyond the fact that the relationship between base and superstructure might be more complicated that a simple one to one relation, is that it speaks of culture as an institution that transmits ideas from reality to the subject. This has two obvious consequences. The first is that it precludes speaking about resistant cultures that are not revolutionary. Culture is transmitted from capital to the subject, when subjects interact, they simply reiterate the relationship between capital and subject. There is a relationship of dominance, one can either resist it or capitulate to it. The second consequence is that this description of culture focuses on the message transmitted. The Benjamin and Horkheimer and Adorno pieces display this most clearly, but each piece engaged with so far functions the same way. Capital exists as totality; there is little opportunity to create sheltered spaces away from it where resistant cultures can develop. Therefore, it is only necessary to look at the messages spread within culture, not the practices developed to create resistant messages, since the only legitimate social change involves a wholesale disruption/reversal of the centrality of capital.

However, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” links the material production of culture with the ideological effects of its consumption. While it seems that Benjamin still in a way privileges the message transmitted, he connects it to the manner
in which it is produced. Unfortunately, the producer is an entity unconnected with the consumer, a move Benjamin shares in common with Horkheimer and Adorno, whose agent of the culture industry exists apart from his or her consumer. What if we expanded the field of cultural producers to include those participating in subculture, whose very participation helps to shape its features, its goals, and its artifacts? Subjection occurs not just in the disadvantaged class, but in the advantaged class as well, which would lead one to believe that the act of producing culture is one with as much ideological content as the act of consuming culture.

Cultural Studies

Whereas the goal of critical theory is to situate culture within the political by expanding the political beyond the public sphere, cultural studies attempts to offer means by which we can analyze culture. Mixing Marxism and semiotics, a science of signs that posits an arbitrary connection between signifier and signified that is socially constructed, cultural studies seeks to draw out the way texts are constructed in order to covertly support dominant ideology. Many versions of cultural studies offer ways of resisting dominant power through the interpretation and understanding of signs.

In “The Commodity as Spectacle”, Guy Debord claims, “In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”61 This statement at once calls the cultural critic to look at style and text, since we have detached from the real in late capitalism, but also allows for a critique of

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excessive focus on style when the possibility of a new form of cultural production is created. He goes on to state, “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.” This point is all too often missed by treatments of subculture as style; the leather jacket is a floating signifier; it is meaningless without its socially constructed place in a sign chain. In this case, the leather jacket adorned a certain way, in combination with other signals, can act as an interpellating call, seeking recognition from those within the subculture and rupture for those without.

Raymond Williams contributes a great deal in “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory”, not least at all that he problematizes a the use of the word ‘determine’ in terms of the relationship between base and superstructure; arguing that there is not a one to one causal relationship between the two, but rather the relationships between them are often delayed or indirect in nature. Also useful are his conceptualizations of residual and emergent cultures. Residual cultures are those with some degree of distance, whether real or metaphorical, from mainstream culture, usually considered the residue of a previous, now incorporated, culture. Emergent cultures are those new cultures that are incorporated into mainstream culture; these fuel the need of late capitalist culture to constantly renew itself. Punk, originally an emergent culture, has become a residual culture by virtue of outlasting its cultural moment, existing in between residual incorporated and residual not incorporated, since parts of it are

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62 Ibid., 118.
63 Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory.” 137.
occasionally mined by the culture industry for novel forms, like pop-punk or emo, but for the most part it is left to its own devices.\textsuperscript{64}

In \textit{Subculture: The Meaning of Style}, Dick Hebdige first describes a radical shift in the study of culture from the pre-modern to the modern; whereas once culture was synonymous with high culture, it now included popular culture and the places and artifacts of working class life.\textsuperscript{65} Culture shifted from describing works of art to the landscape of one’s life, though it is important to keep in mind that both were analyzed in terms of their existences as texts, rather than as the practices that created and contextualized them. He describes this phenomenon, in conjunction with the advent of semiotics, as the beginning of the readability of cultures.\textsuperscript{66}

Influence by both Barthes and Marxism, Hebdige seeks to read ideology from style, noting that:

The failure to see through appearances to the real relations which underlie them does not occur as the direct result of some kind of masking operation consciously carried out by individuals, social groups, or institutions. On the contrary, ideology by definition thrives beneath consciousness. It is here, at the level of ‘normal common sense’, that ideological frames of reference are most firmly sedimented

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 138.  
\textsuperscript{65} Hebdige, \textit{Subculture: The Meaning of Style}, 5-6.  
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 8.
and most effective, because it is here that their ideological
nature is most effectively concealed.67

Ideology hides in plain sight. It is the job of the cultural critic to bring ideology into the
light of day through the analysis of surfaces in conjunction with an analysis of the class
relationships that exist in capitalism. Youth subcultures rebel against dominant ideology,
but it is unclear that they possess agency in the process:

The challenge to hegemony which subcultures represent is
not issued directly by them. Rather it is expressed
obliquely, in style. The objections are lodged, the
contradictions are displayed (and, as we shall see,
“magically resolved”) at the profoundly superficial level of
appearances: that is, at the level of signs.68

The critique levied by youth culture is therefore born within commodity fetishism, which
inevitably co-opts it. Youth rebellion becomes mainstream style; punk becomes new
wave; critique becomes a Che Guevara t-shirt.

In fact, subculture as described by Hebdige is not co-opted, but instead is always
already a part of the dominant order. Style is the assembling of commodities to
communicate a message through them, a move that is performed within and undermined
by commodity fetishism, the phenomena which Marx describes as a religious
phenomenon, “productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed
with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in

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67 Ibid., 11.
68 Ibid., 17.
the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands.”⁶⁹ Style as a form of resistance is compromised from the start; one must tacitly accept the nature of the commodity in capitalism in order to deploy it as a tool of resistance. The use-value of the subcultural commodity is therefore found in its relationship to the products of hegemonic culture, “Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic.”⁷⁰

Hebdige’s version of subculture relies on the trade of symbolic value, punk is simply another good whose novelty is initially off-putting but inevitably accepted by the marketplace as an acceptable cultural product. It is worth noting that in its genesis in Britain, the style of punk did not emerge organically out of youth culture, but was a product of capitalism. Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, owners of Sex a self-styled avant-garde clothing store, sought to give rebellious youths in London a new form of youth rebellion and subculture all the while supporting their business.⁷¹ Subculture, in Hebdige’s understanding, is simply cutting edge fashion.

Applying something resembling radical politics to popular culture, John Fiske argues that consumers of pop culture engage in semiotic resistance, which emanates from, “the desire of the subordinate to exert control over the meanings of their lives, a control that is typically denied them in their material social conditions.”⁷² He states, “Popular culture is made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant. Popular culture is

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⁷⁰ Ibid., 322.
⁷¹ Savage, England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond.
⁷² Fiske, Reading the Popular, 10.
made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it. 73

Looking at a diverse set of cultural artifacts from the beach, to the mall, to Madonna and network news, Fiske describes the ways in which consumers make their own meanings out of mass culture. These meanings are often, according to Fiske, counter-hegemonic; they disrupt the ideological power of capital by allowing various readings. It is a radical democratization of the move within cultural studies from the high to the everyday, cultural theory has been wrested from cultural theorists.

Fiske speaks of young fans of Madonna:

If her fans are not ‘cultural dopes,’ but actively choose to watch, to listen to, and imitate her rather than anyone else, there must be some gaps or spaces in her image that escape ideological control and allow her audiences to make meanings that connect with their social experience. For many of her audiences, this social experience is one of powerlessness and subordination, and if Madonna as a site of meaning is not to naturalize this, she must offer opportunities for resisting it. Her image becomes, then, not a model meaning for young girls in patriarchy, but a site of semiotic struggle between the forces of patriarchal

73 Ibid., 2.
control and feminine resistance, of capitalism and the subordinate, of the adult and the young.\textsuperscript{74}

Meaning, to Fiske, like the other theorists within cultural studies is paramount, whether that meaning is transmitted by capital to the proletariat, or is negotiated and resisted. What seems to be missing here is the role of practices, the means by which these meanings are made. It could be the case that there is as much meaning in the ways in which culture and its meanings are produced than in the end texts themselves.

There is a lot to be learned from reading culture as a text, but if that is the only way we are looking at pop culture, and specifically sub-cultures, we are missing a great deal. Reading texts seems to tacitly assume a stable subject and a stable text; that is to say, it looks at the end product rather than at the process. Beyond that, textual analysis has little to say about the DIY aspects of punk, as it deals in meaning rather than production. To use Fiske’s example of Madonna, it may be true that some consumers might make their own meanings, but they never stop being consumers. They are also relying on the culture industry to provide them with texts to interpret, not making their own culture. To be crude, does it matter that your reading of Madonna is emancipatory? You’ve already granted the culture industry legitimacy by taking part as a consumer. Beyond that, reconceiving the image of Madonna might be liberating for a young woman, but doesn’t that take away the context in which Madonna exists, as a relentless co-opter of queer club culture. To me, Fiske’s progressive politics seem profoundly conservative, rather than to challenge hegemony, they allow for space and gaps in meaning that

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 97.
consumers can use to better fit into their position as consumers. Contrast this to the cover of the punk zine that showed three chord diagrams with the text, “This is a chord. This is another. This is a third. NOW FORM A BAND”. (text capitalized in the original)\textsuperscript{75}

In addition, Fiske’s and Hebdige’s conceptions of resistance presupposes an essential, a priori self rather than a self that is constituted by both meaning and practices. Fiske’s consumer engages in semiotic resistance because there seems to be a truth to their conception of self that is at odds with dominant culture. A cultural theory that takes into account a possibility of transformative practices could posit a subject that is created as a resistant subject through a process of habituation in the production of culture and the political dynamics of the places and practices required for production, distribution, and consumption of culture.

Punk Studies

In his study of punk sub-culture, Dick Hebdige argues that:

Subcultures represent ‘noise’ (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media.

We should therefore not underestimate the signifying power of the spectacular subculture not only as a metaphor for potential anarchy ‘out there’ but as an actual

\textsuperscript{75} Duncombe, \textit{Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture}, 119.
mechanism of semantic disorder: a kind of temporary blockage in the system of representation.\textsuperscript{76}

While it is interesting to note that Hebdige seems to in this quote claim the existence of an objective reality outside of that which is represented, punk representing the ‘truth’ of social unrest, it is more important to note that he seems to be positioning subculture as an utterance. Punk is inseparable from its message, if its capacity for resistance to dominant culture lies in style; it is the symbolic and real symptom of schisms within post-war Britain. While the subculture is the message, there is little to address the affect of punk subculture on the individual participating.

Hebdige goes on to claim, “such a subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. It operates exclusively in the leisure sphere...It communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown.”\textsuperscript{77} It is no surprise then that Hebdige sees punk only as a temporary resistance, “youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, buy they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones.”\textsuperscript{78} The means by which Hebdige sets out to analyze culture lead inevitably to his conclusions. Yet if he were to incorporate practices as not only resistance but as potentially creating resistant subjects, he might have to abandon the temporal aspects of spectacle upon which he rests his theory. It should be mentioned that by 1978, British punk subculture had veered into its

\textsuperscript{76} Hebdige, \textit{Subculture: The Meaning of Style}, 90.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 94-95.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 96.
own form of DIY post-punk that included various activities and institutions like independent record and distribution companies, many created by the participants in the subculture that took seriously independence from the culture industry as a political act.79

Hebdige’s study addresses the moment of punk as cultural event, but not its persistence as a subculture that moved farther and farther from mainstream culture at the very moment it became most acceptable. This analysis of subculture also says very little about the individual who participates; this is perhaps understandable considering his debt to Marxism and its tendency to privilege the political bloc over the individual political actor. This isn’t to say that style isn’t important; it is at once resistance and provocation aimed at mainstream society as well as a form of subcultural interpellation, a means of hailing others within the scene.

Greil Marcus situates punk within a larger context of artistic and political resistance, from the Paris Commune to the Situationist International, in Lipstick Traces, his account of punk. Punk exists as political in its attempts to disrupt dominant culture through spectacle; there is little discussion of the production of punk, nor is there discussion of punk subculture beyond collective utterances of resistance. Text remains central, whether it is music, performance, zine writing, or personal narratives of participants. The punk is neglected in favor of the punk celebrity, whose life somehow represents the disaffection felt by many post-war youths.

The participant in punk is therefore reified; he or she exists through time in one moment, or a collection of discrete moments, of spectacular resistance. Politics is about

79 Reynolds, Rip it up and Start Again.
representation; the individual is only as political as he or she exists as synedoche. Punk is an act of speaking, not a possibly constitutive collection of activities and practices. This conceptualization of politics constricts the possibilities of punk and youth culture as a whole to persist through time as a potentially emancipatory and transformative set of experiences.

Kevin Mattson offers an expanded understanding of punk in “Did Punk Matter?”:

Contemporary cultural theory often overstresses the reception of cultural products, highlighting the subjective act of enjoying and consuming mass culture commodities. This stress plays down the very determination that cultural producers actually impart to their products…young people participating in the subculture of the 1980’s were obsessed both with the production of cultural products as well as self-definition and issues of identity within a corporate culture.80

Politics within Mattson’s conception of punk were not only located in the spectacle of punk, but also in the activities necessary to create and maintain a subculture removed from the culture industry. Punk existed not only as its own critique of mainstream society, but in essence took the place of the traditional left, considering that after the

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1960’s the New Left splintered into multiple competing single issue activist and identity groups.81

Though as a punk of the 1990’s I balk at Mattson’s use of the past tense in describing punk subculture, he offers a compelling picture of punk politics that is equally concerned with text and practice. Do-it-yourself ethics play a large part in his discussion of punk; it was once necessary for the continued survival of punk and a political act. I would add that participation in punk subculture encourages both a conscious consideration of punk’s political potential and facilitates the training of citizens who take seriously a notion of responsibility for maintaining a subculture, which could lead to the creation of individual punks as better citizens in society as a whole outside the subculture.

Stacy Thompson sets out his project in *Punk Productions* thusly:

The entire field of punk can be understood as a set of problems that unfold from a single contradiction between aesthetics and economics, between punk, understood as a set of cultural productions and practices that comprise an aesthetic field, and capitalism and the commodity, an economic field and an economic form in which punks discover that they must operate…Consequently, punk both raises and attempts to work through two related problematics, one economic and one aesthetic: Can the

81 Ibid., 82.
commodity form be taken up and used against capitalism?

Can all aesthetics be commodified?\textsuperscript{82}

This takes us back to the beginnings of Marxist cultural studies and cuts to the difficulty of conceptualizing resistance in a totalizing cultural-political-economic system. Are there enough gaps within the structure to accommodate punk politics, or is punk simply false consciousness?

Thompson implicitly raises another concern: How are we to know when practices exist as texts and can we differentiate between practices as texts and practices experienced by agents? When the intent of DIY is as an utterance of a resistance, it is at once a practice, as it focuses on the ‘doing’ of culture, but it is also a communication of sorts to dominant culture. Should we be separating the two, or simply allowing the space to exist where practices are taken as part of the emancipatory project of punk? Does this project presuppose a unity of intention that actually exists, or are we reading coherence on disparate activities that are only tangentially related to one another?

Sociological Approaches to Punk as a Subculture

There are two approaches to punk within sociology: studies of punk as a subculture and studies of punk as a cultural field. The first concentrates more on the practices of individuals that constitute a subculture as “a social subgroup distinguished from mainstream culture/dominant society by its own norms, values, rules, and, especially in youth subcultures, its own music and style.”\textsuperscript{83} These norms, values, and rules are constantly being negotiated, altered, and splintered into different groups within

\textsuperscript{82} Thompson, \textit{Punk Productions: Unfinished Business}, 2-3.

\textsuperscript{83} Haenfler, \textit{Straigtedge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change}, 33.
the subculture. The second, utilizing Bourdieu’s conception of cultural fields, focuses on the interactions between subcultural participants and institutions that interact in the creation of works of art; the focus is moved away from individuated actions to a social network of, in the case of punk, bands, zines, and record labels.

The ways in which politics informs these practices and institutions can be hazy in this approach, often relying on the utterances of bands and zines or individual resistances, which are often borrowed from Dick Hebdige’s conception of subcultural style. However, if one sees individual and social practices as potentially constitutive of political subjects, these approaches provide ample resources for analyses of subjectivities. Boundaries, formal and informal rules, and sets of meanings and practices are created and negotiated, all of which are potential sites of politicized contestation.

Lauraine Leblanc’s ethnographic study *Pretty in Punk* looks at the experiences of women within punk through observation, participation, and interviews with participants within the scene, utilizing a phenomenological approach that privileges the everyday lives and practices of women in a male dominated subculture.84 Robert Wood utilizes case studies, interviews, content analysis of straightedge songs, and semiotic analysis of symbolism within the straightedge scene85, a branch of punk that emphasizes drug-free living, in *Straightedge Youth*. This would seem to fit more within cultural studies, but within the straightedge scene, practices and artifacts are intimately connected with cultural outputs, to such an extent that the lyrics sheet of a straightedge album often reads like a manual on how to be a straightedger. Finally, Ross Handler’s study, *Straightedge*,

utilizes interviews and observation to construct an overview of the straightedge scene and its politics. It is worth noting that Leblanc, Wood, and Haenfler each participated in punk prior to entering academia, giving these studies an authority that is often lacking in studies by non-participants; the rules and practices of subculture are often secret, especially in subcultures that explicitly oppose mainstream society.

Studies of youth cultures are typically focused on male participants, in a subculture as centered around masculine performance and aggression as hardcore punk, women are left almost completely out of the picture.86 Lauraine Leblanc studies the ways in which women inhabit a subculture that is male-dominated, both in terms of being populated largely by males and being defined, both internally and externally, as a performance of masculinity.87 She focuses on the constructions of femininity, the lived experiences, and the resistances both to hegemonic constructions of gender within and without punk, deployed by women within the scene. To be clear, she is speaking of women who are not leaving punk, or creating their own spaces within the scene, but those who negotiate their identities within what remains male-dominated space. She does not pay attention to the Riot Grrrl scene, which is what she calls “a breakaway faction.”88 Since she is mainly dealing with what she terms gutter punks and punk rockers, the Riot Grrrl scene is only tangentially related to the lives of the women she is speaking to and describing; Riot Grrrl however, despite flirtations with separatism, had at least one foot in

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87 Ibid., 105-112.
88 Ibid., 64.
the punk scene since such definitive terms as breakaway faction are hardly descriptive of the ambivalence both of those who leave and those who remain within the scene.

Leblanc claims, “Punk had survived the conservative 80’s, and in the late 80’s and early 90’s renewed itself in a variety of offshoots such as grunge, Riot Grrrl, and ‘queercore.’ The hardcore punk scene declined somewhat in the 90’s and fractured into two factions: punk rockers and gutter punks.”89 Admittedly, it is probably impossible to theorize punk as a whole, since it has become split into multiple subscenes each independent of each other, but Leblanc is making a normative claim here that what she terms punk rockers and gutter punks have the greatest claim to the mantle of what is truly punk. She neglects the straightedge scene and the Riot Grrrl scenes in order to construct what could be mistaken for a coherent subculture. In a way, this move belies an adherence to traditional subcultural studies, with its well-defined borders and coherent politics; it neglects the position of women in other punk scenes, whether they are mobilized around feminist politics or doing behind the scenes work in the case of the straightedge hardcore scene.90 The decision Leblanc makes regarding which parts of the subculture to focus on play a significant role in the results she finds; in choosing a scene in which women engage politically by means of sartorial resistance, she naturally finds resistance in the ways in which gender is performed. If she had been looking at the ways in which straightedge women engaged politics, she might have found radically different practices. This is not to say that Leblanc’s work is somehow flawed, but to argue that the subscenes she chooses to study limit it.

89 Ibid., 59.
90 American Hardcore.
Leblanc argues that in order to enter and remain in punk subculture, girls cut themselves off from other girls, choosing instead to deploy punk identity to construct femininities they can live in, drawing on that subculture to combat sanctions faced from outsiders. However, this construction of identity and affiliation to subculture is more than simply sartorial, “as adolescents affiliate themselves with a subculture, they learn that style is insufficient grounds for claiming subcultural identity. In order to gain acceptance in the group, they must learn, espouse, and exhibit punk beliefs, attitudes, and ‘mentality.’” It should be mentioned that one also must critique these attitudes; becoming punk is often a process of adapting punk to one’s own sense of self. Thus, the process of becoming initiated into the punk scene has as much to do with outward communication through style and music as it does with developing as a political subject in opposition to mainstream society:

These girls saw their lifestyle as a part of the punk rebellion. Those who lived on the streets and had no conventional goals-gutter punks-saw their form of retreat from mainstream society as an embodiment of this rebellion. Many who were pursuing conventional goals-such as being photographers, artists, sociologists, and stockbrokers-through conventional means also couched their aspirations as being rebellious: working within the

91 Leblanc, Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boy’s Subculture, 220.
92 Ibid., 86.
system to change it…To many of these punk girls, almost anything could be, and was, described as rebellious.93

One can imagine that there is potentially a great deal of disagreement between punks within and without the ‘system’ regarding what exactly rebellion means; this conflict between subversion and dropping out played out, as one would rightly guess, not only among women, but throughout the scene.

Adopting punk style, to Leblanc, is more than the adoption of style, but a means of created spaces in which one can experience something approaching freedom:

Although they reject the competitiveness that pits girls and women against each other in the femininity game, punk girls are still effectively isolated from other girls and women, precisely because their decision not to participate in that aspect of femininity differentiates them from those who do. As a result, punk girls are usually left to their own devices in constructing individual, rather than collective, challenges to both mainstream and punk norms of femininity.94

This freedom often puts punk girls in the position to receive social sanction both from members of mainstream society and male members of the subculture; sartorial resistance, as it applies in this case to the performance of gender, is too often taken as speech, which

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93 Ibid., 90.
94 Ibid., 148.
ignores the real costs exacted on those doing the performing. Yet it is just this opposition through social sanction that gives the resistance meaning to the individual.

While Leblanc was looking at the ways in which gender affected the ways in which members of a given subculture define themselves and their roles and places within both mainstream culture and the culture they have chosen, Robert Wood and Ross Haenfler are looking at one subgroup within punk that has developed in conjunction with and in opposition to punk as a whole. Straightedge punk developed in Washington DC in the early 80’s around Minor Threat, developing from an individual critique the more nihilistic aspects of punk and hardcore into a scene in its own right.\textsuperscript{95} It has its own sartorial and musical styles, sets of politics and social norms, and is generally organized around a ‘poison-free’ lifestyle that eschews drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. It is generally considered the most conservative iteration of punk, privileging personal responsibility and moral rectitude over the more traditional left critiques emerging from other punk scenes, though there have been more politically progressive moments within straightedge punk.\textsuperscript{96}

Robert Wood’s study of the straightedge scene pays particular attention to lyrical content and symbolism in the straightedge hardcore scene; a focus that would seem to position him closer to cultural studies. However, it is his conceptualization of subculture itself that he works with and his use of the notion of subcultural schism that places this work somewhat outside a more traditional understanding of subcultures. For Wood,

\textsuperscript{96} Haenfler, \textit{Straightedge: Clean-Living Youth, Hardcore Punk, and Social Change}, 14-16.
straightedge utterances speak not only to those outside the scene, but to those inside the scene as well, an act of continuous reevaluation and reconstruction of the subculture and its participants. This approach also has the potential to expand the scope of study from the message and its creators, to the ways in which non-producing members of a subculture interact and disperse meaning through their participation.

Wood uses Fine and Kleinman’s interactionist conceptualization of subculture, which argues that subcultures “are internally heterogenous due to the fact that they are composed of human beings, all of whom perceive and experience the social world in subjectively different ways.” He continues, quoting Fine and Kleinman, “Each member’s perspective on the shared knowledge of the subculture will necessarily be different from that of any other member. Therefore, even within a homogeneous group, action will require a negotiation of meaning, resulting in the continual production of socially constructed realities.” This is a radically different conception of subculture than the one deployed by Dick Hebdige to describe punk, which posited boundaries and a stable message; it also is able to better explain changes in the subculture over time. Punk has never been a stable category; it is rife with internal contradictions, with dissension regarding its practices and meanings, and with contestations between members. This conception also makes clear that punk and subcultures in general are collective enterprises; while it is true that prospective members are attracted at least in part by its messages and meanings, once they enter into the scene they are each potentially makers, interpreters, and negotiators of meaning and practices within punk.

Ibid.
If subcultures are understood not as homogenous, coherent, and well contained social groups, but as internally heterogeneous, constantly changing, porous social groups, it would seem to follow that individual understandings of and disagreements regarding that state of the scene have the potential to create divisions within the scene. This is understood as subcultural schism. Wood, referring in this case to straightedge, states:

Denoting a rift in the subcultural frame of reference, each faction galvanizes or relates in some way to the straightedge concept, yet articulates a different meaning of the subculture and elaborates a different conception of what being a member is all about. These factions and rifts represent evolving cultural configurations. They emerge as new constellations of straightedge culture.99

Straightedge is itself a result of a line of subcultural schisms; American hardcore breaking off from punk and new wave, straightedge breaking away from the hardcore scene. These are not just bands doing the breaking away and setting up of new scenes, but participants as well. Yet all remain in some way in relation to a history of punk, and a loose allegiance to a larger scene populated by smaller, more particular scenes.

Subcultures are not only speaking to mainstream culture, but also considering Wood’s understanding of straightedge; members of the scene are speaking to themselves as well. Speech and symbolism thus plays several potential roles, both critique of the dominant order and a means by which individuals define themselves and their place in

99 Ibid., 131.
the world. The ‘X’, is ubiquitous in straightedge symbolism; with origins in the DC hardcore scene, it is found on the back of straightedgers’ hands, on record sleeves, on t-shirts and hooded sweatshirts. Wood states:

The act of claiming the X, and in and of itself (at least within a straightedge context), represents something of a boundary ritual. The X demarcates straightedge boundaries, and it identifies those who have made a personal transition into a straightedge identity. Indeed, it also distinguishes the wearer from perceived outsiders, and it signifies various levels of meaning. In the first instance, it embodies something of a public claim about the wearer’s identity. The X, however, not only displays to others the message “I am straightedge,” but it is also an act of self-affirmation.\(^{100}\)

Since straightedge, both in the sense that its poison-free lifestyle is construed as a critique of mainstream society as well as its association with the larger punk scene, is constructed as a political, this choice to adopt the X (or to choose not to) becomes a means by which the individual political subject within the scene defines his or her self and expresses disagreement with the status quo. In Wood’s understanding, speech and symbol play not only a communicative function, but a subject generating function as well.

\(^{100}\) Ibid., 124.
Ross Haenfler, in *Straightedge: Clean-living youth, hardcore punk, and social change*, argues that it is not only the creation of subculture boundaries and means of identification that is political, but that straightedge culture also constitutes a social movement. Lifestyle and politics become inseparable, “In contrast to hippies, punks, and skinheads, sXers[^101] see a clear, drug free mind as pivotal to developing a consciousness of resistance. The movement provides a general opening up to or expansion of social awareness.”[^102] During what Haenfler terms the Emo-influence/Politically Correct[^103] scene that lasted from 1989-1995, straightedge politics included more traditionally left causes like feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist work; however, this scene was relatively short-lived.[^104] Later, straightedge politics took a turn towards militant veganism and animal rights activism, leading often to pro-drug war and anti-abortion

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[^101]: It is not uncommon to see ‘sXe’ used as a shorthand notation for straightedge, and ‘sXer’ for straightedger; Haenfler utilizes both.
[^103]: I applaud Haenfler for mentioning this iteration of straightedge, which is too often overlooked (and incidentally, the scene I was originally drawn to within punk,) but the terms Emo-influenced and Politically Correct are both problematic. While this scene was certainly influenced by early emo bands emerging from Washington DC like Rites of Spring and Embrace, it existed prior to what has become the emo scene, many of whose members look to this iteration of hardcore for influence, or have simply moved from hardcore to emo scenes. Politically Correct is equally problematic, as it too closely associates the politics of this iteration of hardcore with mainstream politics. What Haenfler describes as politically correct was in fact anti-capitalist and anti-liberal, both in terms of the common usage of liberal and its more specific use within political theory. I have found that Left Straightedge, while certainly too unspecific a term, better allows for the internal differences within that scene while allowing it an existence separate from emo and political correctness.
[^104]: Ibid., 14-16, 218-219.
stances; combined with a more hardline stance on straightedge this iteration moved the politics of the scene rightward, forcing some out of that scene.

Deploying a conception of social movements that emphasizes the ways in which members construct a sense of collective identity in a diffuse and decentralized social group, rather than the formal organizations that accompany social movements, Haenfler is arguing for a theorization of social movement in which politics is not just performed outwardly at a given set of targets, but is performed on the level of individual and collective identity formation. The borders between lifestyle and movement politics do not necessarily collapse, but do become porous; each modifying the other. One does not don one cap when at a demonstration and another when he or she goes through daily life; there is interplay between them, lifestyle politics often buttress political commitments and create bonds between members of a social group or subculture.

While Haeflner pays little attention to the institutions that constitute straightedge subculture, privileging instead the ways in which individuals create collective identities, he does mention the DIY ethic:

Independent, underground record companies distribute CDs and vinyl records around the world. Hardcore shows provide consistent central gathering places to celebrate and reaffirm values and share new ideas. Young punk entrepreneurs set up “distros” to sell records, patches, and

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105 Earth Crisis, All Out War, and Firestorm.
106 Punk Planet—“Interview with Duncan Barlow.”
‘zines. Distros, short for “distribution,” serve as the outlet for disseminating the latest hardcore music. The distro owner buys records in bulk from record companies at a discounted price, marks up the price only slightly, then sits at a table during a show selling the goods as the bands play. She or he makes a little money, the record label makes a little money, and, most importantly, kids are constantly exposed to music and ideas unavailable in conventional stores.108

A traditional understanding of subculture not only neglects the material reality of the construction of that subculture, but offers little explanation regarding why members would go to such lengths to promote and sustain it. Conceptualizing subculture in such a way that includes not only musical or sartorial resistance, but exists as a site of collective and subjective identity formation better explains the lengths to which people will go to support the scene.

D.I.Y. as a Cultural Field

The DIY punk scene is a small world; one can be both a cultural producer and a fan I’ve had friends who wrote zines, played in bands, helped book shows, and ran distros. There is a collapse of distance between producer and consumer in the punk scene; it is therefore vital when looking at punk subculture to conceptualize the generation of collective identity and ways of living in connection to the means by which

108 Ibid., 65.
culture is produced, since the two are connected by the practices of many members of the subculture. This is a far cry from the conception of the culture industry by Horkheimer and Adorno, but technological advances has made the tools needed to produce culture attainable to youth culture, and punk provided a readymade aesthetic.

Pierre Bourdieu wrote in *Distinction*, his study of the sociology of consumption, that practices are granted a coherence of meaning in retrospect, by looking at using the formula, “{(habitus)(capital)} + field = practice.”¹⁰⁹ Let us posit capital as those means of production used for the creation and dissemination of culture, the habitus, as described by Randal Johnson, is:

Sometimes described as a ‘feel for the game’, a ‘practical sense’ that inclines agents to act and react in specific situations in a manner that is not always calculated and that is not simply a question of conscious obedience to the rules. Rather, it is a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions. The habitus is the result of a long process of inculcation, beginning in early childhood, which becomes a ‘second sense’ or a second nature.¹¹⁰

DIY becomes the habitus in punk subculture, though it is not learned throughout life, it is often a precondition of becoming fully accepted in punk subculture; it is, in a way, the concession to the command, “do it yourself.” The field of production, according to Ryan Moore:

¹¹⁰ Randall Johnson, “Editor’s Introduction,” 5.
Refers to a network of social relationships that is organized around a particular practice and is relatively autonomous from the social structure at large…A field is somewhat like a game in which agents who occupy different positions in a social hierarchy compete to augment or defend their capital by following rules and strategies that have been worked out over the history of the particular field. The field is a source of constant struggle and conflict, and as a result, its hierarchical positions, tactics for success, and stakes of victory are always shifting.111

Bourdieu emphasizes the role of change, “The literary or artistic field is a field of forces, but is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces.”112 Practices within a subculture, or for that matter dominant culture, are there for the result of not only the artists doing the producing, but of the interactions between multiple actors within various social positions within a defined field with a set of established yet shifting practices and assumptions.

Bourdieu’s conception of the cultural field allows for the reading of culture not as simply the utterance of a singular artist, but as the result of a set of circumstances and social relationships; if the production of art can be read as a politicizing act, then the entire field if rife with the political:

In defining the literary and artistic field as, inseparably, a field of positions and a field of position-takings we also escape from the usual dilemma of internal reading of the work (taken in isolation or within the system of works to which it belongs) and external analysis, i.e. analysis of the social conditions of production of the producers and consumers which is based on the –generally tacit-hypothesis of the spontaneous correspondence or deliberate matching of production to demand or commissions. And by the same token we escape from the correlative dilemma of the charismatic image of artistic activity as pure, disinterested creation by an isolated artist, and the reductionist vision which claims to explain the act of production and its product in terms of their conscious or unconscious external functions, by referring them, for example, to the interests of the dominant class.\textsuperscript{113}

All too often punk, or any other subculture, is reduced to either a knee-jerk response to mainstream culture or the product of a small number of near-heroic artists rebelling against the status quo. The real story, however, is that there are networks of production, distribution, touring, and opinion shaping that cannot be accounted for by traditional readings of subculture.

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 34.
Ryan Moore argues that punk as a field of cultural production creates a site for political development and expression, “The do-it-yourself ethic allows resistance and empowerment to take shape not simply as significations and representations but also in creating an unusual kind of “public sphere” where young people can organize themselves and express dissenting viewpoints about critical social issues.”

Discussing the 80’s hardcore band the Minutemen, Moore states, “The do-it-yourself approach to cultural production has allowed people like Mike Watt to be participants and performers rather than just consumers and spectators, regardless of their ability, experience, or commercial viability.” If you have something to say, then start a band, write a zine, start a label, just do something; one is not expected to be an expert, just to figure out a way to make their voice heard in the scene. The unique facet of DIY is that as a cultural field, expertise or talent is often suspect; it might quell more creative or artistic endeavors, but it is an open invitation for anyone to participate.

The DIY ethic is also integral in creating collective identity in punk:

Methods of do-it-yourself cultural production not only intend to maximize creative control but also intend to enhance subcultural camaraderie, to make friends and support them. In other words, the production of music has not only allowed these people to express themselves

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115 Ibid., 448.
individually, but it has also allowed them to find a sense of community with other musicians and cultural producers.\textsuperscript{116}

This is not only true of musicians, but of show-bookers, zine writers, punk activists, and fans; it is the very conditions of production that allow for the creation and sustenance of the subculture.

Alan O’Connor, in his study \textit{Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy}, also utilizes Bourdieu’s theory of cultural fields to describe DIY:

Bourdieu points out that one of the functions of a Bohemian way of life is that people tend to get social support from others who are doing the same thing. If all of your friends buy their clothes at Goodwill, drive a $500 dollar car (or live downtown and use their bikes), it is much easier to live on a tiny income. People with free time can also find or create interesting places to socialize. It might be a café in Paris, a punk house in Washington, DC, or a cheap bar on the Lower East Side. These are places to hang out, to meet people you might work with in the future, and to get support for opting out of normal middle-class life. It might sometimes be tough, but it could even be fun. This kind of social support allows people to make music

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 451.
that has little or no immediate commercial appeal. Most of us call this the punk scene.\footnote{O’Connor, \textit{Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY}, 17.}

One could just as easily replace music with writing or art or political activism. The support networks created within punk facilitate subcultural life and resistance. This support system is not without sanction. If one decides to leave for greener pastures, he or she is often ostracized from the scene, which demonstrates the uncertainty and instability of the punk scene. O’Connor mentions the firestorm that ensued within the pages of \textit{Maximumrocknroll} and throughout the punk scene in the early 90’s, as major labels started signing punk bands left and right in the wake of the commercial success of grunge and pop-punk, “If successful bands simply leave this underground for the major labels the autonomy of the entire field is weakened. Imagine if these bands instead used their popularity to strengthen independent labels and their distributors, independent promoters and community spaces, zines and the whole punk underground.”\footnote{Ibid., 24.} The betrayal felt by fans had a double effect, it not only served to sever the ties to the underground of bands that left, but to strengthen the loyalty of fans to bands and labels that declined major label advances to stay in the underground.

No one simply enters the scene and decides to start a label:

Within the field as a whole, punk record labels are always started by people with some standing within the scene. It is never simply a business investment. People are in bands,
promote shows, publish zines, make videos, or at least do a box distribution selling records at shows before they start a record label. From this they have knowledge about bands, about the scene in general, but above all they have social contacts with people in the scene.\textsuperscript{119}

Once one starts a label, there are rules of the game generally accepted due to shared habitus, “There have been many markers of the boundaries of punk over the years. Selling 7” records for three dollars. Not having bar codes on CDs. Even not accepting credit cards. These are always contested, sometimes with good reason.”\textsuperscript{120} The debate over barcodes on CDs lead to a serious row in the pages of Maximumrocknroll, some claiming that barcodes were an unacceptable acquiescence to corporate record stores while other argued that position as hopelessly elitist, as not all communities could sustain independent record stores which would cut many out of being able to purchase punk records.

Conclusion

Is punk a text? Or is it a set of practices? Is punk over? Has its potential as political resistance been exhausted? The answers one finds often is contingent upon the means by which her or she studies punk subculture. The cultural theorist can explain the power of the image of punk, but has trouble accounting for its continued existence and the role of production in its emancipatory potential. The Marxist understanding of punk as existing both in aesthetic and economic fields can account better for DIY, but struggles

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 73.
to explain how such a diverse subculture can create a set of coherent politics. Sociology provides several ways of conceptualizing subculture that emphasize practices on the same level as text, but are often hazy on defining exactly what kind of politics is happening in the scene.

In “The Culture that Sticks to Your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies,” Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc argue for a new version of cultural studies that emphasizes everyday life, immediacy, and a rejection of academic elitism, breaking away from traditional cultural studies that is situated squarely in academia and looks down its nose at popular culture. It is not a break with cultural studies per se, but a reassertion of what they see as the best of cultural studies. It seeks to privilege immediacy over distance, which is to say, to privilege emotional connection over reasoned distance from a phenomenon’s initial effects. It seeks to privilege accessibility over academic discourse; if cultural studies is to have an effect on people’s lives, it must be approachable. It also seeks to be both contextual and situational, to pay close attention to the cultural context in which a phenomena is being analyzed, as well as to the times and places in which it happens.

Each of these is a laudable goal. However, despite the claims of being a new cultural studies, the changes proposed are only cosmetic. It is still concerned with what it

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122 Ibid., 6-7.
123 Ibid., 12-13.
124 Ibid., 16-20.
terms, “The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture,” tacitly privileging subversions and resistances over practices. By accepting with little question the material conditions of both production and consumption, the potential for analysis of the politics of popular culture is relegated to an exercise in divining meanings out of the discursive ether. There is also a paucity of discussion over what exactly constitutes resistance or politics.

What is needed is not a cosmetic makeover of cultural studies, but a recommitment to questions of politics, practices, subjectivity, and epistemology. We must no longer take for granted the politics of cultural studies; its Marxist pedigree has largely been negated by postmodern skepticism of grand narratives. It seems acceptable now to accept the continued hegemony of liberal democracies; all too often cultural studies reads as a manual on how to transform cultural subversion into a means of making modern capitalism livable for previously marginalized social groups. We must take practices seriously; it is not the content alone that gives a cultural phenomenon meaning, it is the practices that go into its production, transmission, and consumption. A television program might create the discursive space for some group or another to experience themselves or receive some sort of validation through the meanings they generate, but they are still consuming the medium of television in the way intended. Their minds might be liberated in some small way, but their bodies remain in front of the television. We don’t just read culture, we do culture. It is therefore incumbent upon us to ask not only what meanings are created, but what we are doing to create those meanings. We must also engage substantively with issues of subjectivity and

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125 Ibid., 21.
epistemology. Such questions are often left off the table; but when we talk about the making of meaning in culture, we assume the subject, but leave it unclear just who this person is and how he or she experiences the world.

If I am being especially hard on cultural studies, it is because culture is absolutely vital to understanding politics and the political in late capitalism. It is the ground on which we stand when we interact with ourselves and with others; it binds us together and gives us a shared experience of the world. Cultural studies has done a great deal to expand the scope of what is worth studying, but should not be allowed to rest on its laurels. If it is to be truly engaged with the politics of culture, it must take a hard look at itself, rather than to rest in its gradual acceptance in academia.

A study of the politics of culture, specifically in this case the politics of punk, owes a great deal to cultural studies, which established the popular as a legitimate site of political and academic analysis. However, it must simultaneously cast an eye to the ways in which it is produced. Who benefits from culture? How? By situating culture as ideology, Marxism urges the analysis of the production of culture and its function as a means by which subjects are positioned and conditioned by the needs of capital. What are we doing when we produce and consume culture? Does it change us as subjects and citizens? How? Sociological studies of subculture pay close attention to the ways in which members of a subculture construct practices and meanings in order to create and maintain sites of culture outside of the dominant order; the sociology of cultural fields pays attention to the ways in which participants create institutions while at the same time
producing cultural artifacts. A cultural studies committed to the political will attempt in some way to synthesize each of these approaches to culture.
Punk is loud. Punk is loud music, loud style, and loud politics. If the subject can be said to speak itself, the punk subject screams itself. It is no surprise then that the majority of academic literature on punk is concerned with the text. It arrives on the heels of the linguistic turn in philosophy, in turn appropriated by cultural studies, has led to all manner of discussion regarding what it is exactly that punk is saying. Music speaks, zines speak, style speaks, and, to a certain extent, practices speak. What I wish to look at here, though this is also true of the rest of this work, is what happens when punk isn’t speaking. Punk isn’t just happening while the band or record plays, when one is dressed up (because, really, just not that many of us get into the fashion of punk; many of us just can’t pull it off), or when one is reading a zine. Subculture is not just speaking to; it entails a simultaneous turning away from dominant order or mainstream society.

Looking at the practices that comprise the straightedge scene, as well as to a lesser extent Do-It-Yourself forms of production, one sees that if there is an ethic of punk, it is to be found as much in practices as in texts.

Traditionally, studies of punk look at the utterance; it would seem to be the most obvious place to look for subcultural meaning. Whether it is a study of the ways in which the Sex Pistols’ *Never Mind the Bollocks* traversed high art and low culture\(^\text{126}\), the role of authenticity and visual style in *The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle*\(^\text{127}\), the problem of racism

\(^{126}\) Garnett, “Too Low to Be Low.”
\(^{127}\) Huxley, “‘Ever Get the Feeling You’ve Been Cheated’: Anarchy and Control in The Great Rock ‘n’ Roll Swindle.”
in the British punk scene\textsuperscript{128} or more recent expressions of feminist politics within Riot
Grrrl zines,\textsuperscript{129} the politics of punk is located in the communicative act. In her study of
subcultural legitimacy, Kathryn Fox locates authenticity, or what she labels ‘hardcore
punks’\textsuperscript{130}, in the willingness to actively identify with the scene:

The feature that distinguished hardcore punks from other
punks was their belief in, and concern for, the punk
counterculture…While the other types of punks made no
reference to group beliefs or values, the hardcores revered
the counterculture…Overt behavioral and physical
attributes, though, were major ways hardcore punks
showed disdain for the system…However, this verbal
pronouncement had to be backed by a certain lifestyle that
further indicated commitment to the group. This lifestyle
consisted of escaping the system in some way.\textsuperscript{131}

Thus, positing a communicative nature to practices, without mentioning the subject
producing aspects of that practice, collapses the practices of punk and its utterances.

Within punk studies, analyses of style and practices seem to share a similar
understanding or elision of the subject. Cultural studies looks at the creation, or more

\textsuperscript{128} Sabin, “‘I Won’t let that Dago by’: Rethinking Punk and Racism.”
\textsuperscript{129} Zobl, “Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!,” Garafalo and Rosenberg, “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within.”
\textsuperscript{130} Not to be confused with hardcore punk, or members of that particular subculture. The
term hardcore here is used to denote a higher level of status or legitimacy than a ‘softcore punk’.
\textsuperscript{131} Fox, “Real Punks and Pretenders: The Social Organization of a Counterculture,” 352-354.
correctly, the end-states of subcultures in terms of style, music, literature, or fashion. What is assumed here is a speaking subject who exists prior to the utterance.

Authenticity therefore becomes a crucial part of analysis; the better the style expresses some notion of an individual’s or a set of individuals’ ‘authentic self’, the better the form of expression, the more legitimacy it possesses both inside and outside the bounds of subculture.

In “Did Punk Matter?”, Kevin Mattson seeks to put practices in the forefront of subcultural analysis, ahead of style:

This essay will, at first, de-emphasize the stylistic elements of this American subculture of the 1980’s. In doing so, I am not denying these elements but placing the stress, at least at first, elsewhere-on the ways in which youth created culture by developing their own concrete institutional means of cultural production…I want to stress the ability of cultural practices to resist-not necessarily change-the larger structures they rebel against…young people tried to renew sincerity in cultural production and challenged the dominant control of the corporate market in America.¹³²

Practices here are valued for their ability to communicate resistance to mainstream America. Political subjects, in this case members of the punk scene, create a music scene in part to symbolize their resistance to dominant culture. Implicit in this analysis is a

relatively static notion of the self, a self that exists prior to cultural or subcultural
practice.

Stacy Thompson takes up Mattson’s project of theorizing punk not simply as
style, but as a dialectical relationship between aesthetics and economics:

The entire field of punk can be understood as a set of
problems that unfold from a single contradiction between
aesthetics and economics, between punk, understood as a
set of cultural productions and practices that comprise an
aesthetic field, and capitalism and the commodity, an
economic field and an economic form in which punks
discover that they must operate…Punks want to change the
world, and many believe that what most needs to be
changed is capitalism. Consequently, punk both raises and
attempts to work through two related problematics, one
economic and one aesthetic: Can the commodity form be
taken up and used against capitalism? Can all aesthetics be
 commodified?¹³³

He continues defining the punk project in his discussion of several different scenes that
could be said to define the ongoing creation of meaning in punk in terms of the
articulation of desires that periodically emerge and are repressed by or incorporated into
capitalism:

Punk performs a type of cultural work: it affords us the opportunity to recognize collective, cultural, and political desires as ours and to become conscious of them as such. The members of each scene strive to satisfy the desires that drive their scene...In short, “punk” is the name that can be assigned to an organization of radical desires that, combined, express a wish for a noncapitalist structuring of social reality.\textsuperscript{134}

Punk is the means by which the subculture, and presumably its members, expresses its desire for a different world.

Punk practices, to Thompson, are therefore primarily communicative phenomena, the means by which subjects express themselves or the means by which subcultures speak their resistance. The use of ‘desire’, is also problematic here, as Thompson is unclear on the ontology of these desires, “By way of summary, these desires can be named. Three emerge in New York: resisting commercialization, seizing control over the means of production, and fostering collectivity,”\textsuperscript{135} continuing on to describe the ways in which desires are articulated in other scenes. He finds these desires by looking at punk artifacts:

If punk artifacts/commodities are understood as the effects and accretions of the emergence of repressed desires, then these artifacts can be interpreted for clues to the desires that

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
formed them…I have chosen to focus upon certain artifacts, sifted out of each scene, that, while by no means defining the scene, serve as nodes at which either no or recurring desires intersect.\(^{136}\)

While Thompson is rather accurate in his assessment of the desires articulated, he is rather less clear on the means by which these desires interact with the subjects who express them; again there seems to be a subject existing prior in some way to their entry into a given scene. The practices are still secondary to the messages they facilitate.

It is also difficult to explain why, if punk is the expression of desire, people leave the scene or bands sign to major labels. While it is my argument that punk practices are in themselves political, the connection could only be described as an indirect causation; adopting and adhering to punk practices do not lead necessarily to a given type of political subjectivity, as they seem to in Thompson’s theorization. If we locate the political content of punk subculture in the practices punks undertake, rather than in the subjects themselves, we may be better able to address both the political and transitory nature of some youth cultures. What coherence of punk politics exists in Thompson’s conceptualization is due, at least in part, to his utilization of desire, which seems to rely on a stable conception of the self that is ontologically prior to politics. Desire presents another related problem, which is the conceptualization of desire as the truth of the

\(^{136}\) Ibid., 14.
unconscious within psychoanalytic theory\textsuperscript{137}, bringing us back to the problem of authenticity.

Even if we adopt a post-modern approach to the self, which elides the problem of authenticity of speaking subjects, we are still talking about the effects of communication. Angela McRobbie, speaking here of feminist subjectivities, charts the deconstruction of the ‘Real Me’ in favor of a social self that is, “an amalgam of fragmented identities formed in discourse and history and called into being both by the experiences of femininity and by the existence and availability of a feminist discourse.”\textsuperscript{138} The symbolism of punk disconnects from those speaking or doing it, but this gets us no closer to the actual political content of practices.

One should be cautious not to ascribe motives to punk productions from artifacts alone; those who have already entered the scene and engaged in punk practices typically create them. As much as I would like to conceptualize punk as an anti-capitalist enterprise, and will attempt to do so later, most productive work is aimed around simply maintaining the scene. The fact is, but for isolated moments of incorporation into the culture industry, mainstream culture has no use for punk; if someone wants to go to a punk show and there is no scene in the area, he or she needs to make it happen. Speaking for myself, I didn’t start booking shows or writing a zine because I was anti-capitalist; my anti-capitalist politics came from seeing the possibilities of a world beyond capitalism through my work in the scene.

\textsuperscript{137}\textit{Lacan, “The Function and Field of Language in Psychoanalysis”}.
\textsuperscript{138}\textit{McRobbie, Postmodernism and Popular Culture}, 71.
I am not arguing here against the study of texts, be they artifacts or practices, in favor of a study purely of the subject-generating properties of subcultural practices. What I am proposing is that the politics and subsequent subjectivities of a given subculture emerge not only from utterances and a set or sets of practices that facilitate them, but also from the everyday practices occurring within and without the bounds of subcultural activity. What are we doing, but not saying?

It is typically assumed by those studying subcultures that its members are oriented toward mainstream society. The communicative content of a subculture is usually leveled as a critique of the dominant order. However, an integral part of subcultural life is the turning away from the mainstream, punk with its middle finger in the air. Therefore, studies of youth subcultures must be concerned not only with the ways in which critique manifests itself in utterances, but the ways in which critique manifests itself in, and is in part created by, those practices that take place when our backs are turned.

In “Freedom’s Silences”, Wendy Brown, building on the arguments of Michel Foucault, posits silence as, “not simply an aesthetic but a political value, a means of preserving certain practices and dimensions of existence from regulatory power, from normative violence, as well as from the scorching rays of public exposure.” She also warns about the dangers of studying silence:

Silence can be an effect of discourse; it can also function as resistance to regulatory discourse. And just as silenced

139 Brown, “Freedom’s Silences,” 85.
discourses may contain elements of freedom, places unnoticed and hence unregulated by powerful interests, so their disinterring, even by the well-intentioned genealogist, can signal the end of their existence as a preserve for freedom.\textsuperscript{140}

Punk has been appropriated by mainstream culture on several occasions; each time there is a reaction within the subculture to resist total incorporation. One of the means by which this resistance is made possible is the diverse and decentralized nature of punk. The subculture is not monolithic; punks in different locations taking part in different scenes shape their communities differently. If there is no one proper definition or manifestation of punk, it is nearly impossible to incorporate the scene in its totality.

If one posits that subjects are, if not created by, but at least conditioned by the discursive landscapes and practices of the world from which they emerge, then one is able to situate politics not only in meanings but in the everyday activities of subjects. In her study of Egyptian piety movements, Saba Mahmood states:

If the ability to effect change in the world and in oneself is historically and culturally specific (both in terms of what constitutes “change” and the means by which it is effected), then the meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being.

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 89.
responsibility, and effectivity…Agental capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms.141

That is to say, if the subject is created in the world, rather than existing ontologically prior to experience, we must look not only at how he or she speaks against prevailing norms, but how those norms are lived. This is not to denigrate the role of speech, but to suggest other relevant sites of the political; speech is not just communicative and elements of it could be considered practices. What are we doing when we speak? Are we risking anything? Since we are dealing here with a resistant subculture, we must look at what norms and practices are adopted as resistance as well as those norms and practices that are imported from dominant culture.

In order to privilege the textual, the cultural or political theorist cleaves away the meaning of practices internalized in the subject in favor of those meanings outwardly spoken:

Even in those instances where bodily practices are considered within political analysis, they are understood as symbols deployed by social movements toward political ends, serving at most as vehicles for the expression of group interests or political differences. The specific

conception of bodily practices and the forms they take are not in themselves seen to have political implications.\textsuperscript{142} Mahmood attributes this to the influence on modernist politics of Kantian ethics, which construct “ethics as an abstract system of regulatory norms, values, and principles…In this view, ethical practices may elucidate a moral rule, or even symbolize the value a moral code exemplifies, but the manifest form of an ethical practice does not help elaborate the substance of a moral system.”\textsuperscript{143} The practice is therefore bound to the meaning it facilitates, a move that tends to the oversimplification regarding the connections between practices and meanings. If the practice is contingent on the meaning, it follows that those practices that do not support one’s understanding or conceptualization of the political meanings of a given culture or subculture will be neglected in favor of those that do fit. The theorist who works backward from meaning to practice therefore sets him or herself up to posit an overly unified or stable meaning from practices.

Mahmood then sets out to approach ethics in terms of positive ethics:

In which the particular form that ethics takes is not a contingent but a necessary aspect of understanding its substantive content. Originally grounded in the tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, and more recently expanded by Michel Foucault, ethics in this formulation is founded upon particular forms of discursive practice, instantiated through

\textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 119.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 119-120.
specific sets of procedures, techniques, and exercises, 
through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come 
to be formed.\textsuperscript{144}

To put it another way, Claire Colebrook explains, “Foucault’s genealogy of modern 
sexual hermeneutics demands that we focus less on an action as meaningful (seeking its 
origin or why it occurs) and more on the action as an event (describing its function or 
how it works).”\textsuperscript{145} She continues:

What Foucault describes, or creates, in ancient ethics is a positive ethics in which actions are evaluated according to what they do rather than what they mean…What is valorized, or effected…is not some voluntarist form of aesthetic self-willing: for Foucault demonstrates clearly the regulations and constraints that were constitutive of any care of self. The ethics presented show that ethics can be seen as immanent to practices, and that there can be forms of ethics that can operate with a self that is not a hidden interiority set against a series of actions.\textsuperscript{146}

For example, we should look not only at the end product in terms of the content of a fanzine, or for that matter we should not read back from the meaning derived from the end product the politics of its production, but at the ways in which each step of the

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 120.  
\textsuperscript{145} Colebrook, “Ethics, Positivity, and Gender”, 40.  
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 43.
production of a zine constitute a set of practices that shape the individual as an ethical subject. The acts that go into the zine’s creation, from production to distribution are can be read as a construction of ethical subjectivity. A zine writer not only communicates her ideas, but must find ways of writing and design that fit her ideas, must find a way to have it produced on a limited budget (which is often in itself an anti-capitalist act), must network with other zine-makers, must sell their zines at shows. The zine-maker is constantly learning techniques and practices that not only facilitate the dissemination of their ideas, but also play a not insignificant role in defining for them the possibilities for self-expression within a dominant culture that privileges consumption over production.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss in further detail the shape of Foucaultian ethics, its consequences, and its problems. I will also look at straightedge hardcore as one example of constructing positive ethics in terms of subculture, utilizing several sociological studies of the straightedge scene and suggest ways in which this approach can be utilized in studying punk as a whole.

Positive Ethics

Commenting upon Kant’s essay “What is Enlightenment,” Michel Foucault lays out a provisional definition of critique, “I would therefore propose, as a very first definition of critique, this general characterization: the art of not being governed quite so much.” He continues:

However, above all, one sees that the core of critique is basically made of the bundle of relationships that are tied to

147 Foucault, “What is Critique?,” 45.
one another, or one to the two others, power, truth, and the subject. And if governmentalization is indeed this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through the mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth…critique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.148

In another piece on the same text by Kant, Foucault proffers a definition of modernity:

Thinking back on Kant’s text, I wonder whether we may not envisage modernity rather as an attitude than as a period of history. And by “attitude,” I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. A bit, no doubt, like what the Greeks called an ethos.149

Foucault reinterprets modernity and critique not as abstract categories applied to forms of thought, but as sets of practices; he returns to the ancient Greek notion of

148 Ibid., 47.
149 Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?,” 105.
positive ethics, which located ethical substance not in an activity’s ends or meanings applied to abstract, largely negative, prohibitions, but in the art of the ways in which one lives one’s life and becomes a subject. There are two central claims in regards to subjectivity at play here, the first that the subject is grounded in activity and experience, the second that the subject is malleable or transformable. These passages also foreshadow a potential critique of Foucault’s ethics, that they are either too voluntaristic or too deterministic. However, I would argue that, returning for a moment to Saba Mahmood’s reading of Foucault, that autonomy is bound up with the subject-informing or constituting nature of certain practices in such a way that is difficult to disentangle.

Foucault links the aesthetic, the political, and the ethical with his use of the term art in these passages, in The Use of Pleasure, he states:

I am referring to what might be called the “arts of existence.” What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria. These “arts of existence,” these “techniques of the self”…

He describes Greek morality as two-fold, as a moral code and sets of behaviors, what he refers to as:

\footnote{Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 10-11.}
The real behavior of individuals in relation to the real behavior of individuals in relation to the rules and values that are recommended to them: the word thus designates the manner in which they comply more or less fully with a standard of conduct, the manner in which they obey or resist and interdiction or a prescription; the manner in which they respect or disregard a set of values.151

In *The Politics*, Aristotle speaks of the importance of education in the creation of good citizens:

Now men become good and excellent through three things. These three are nature, habit, and reason. For one must first develop naturally as a human being and not some one of the other animals, and so also be of a certain quality in body and soul. But there is no benefit in certain qualities developing naturally, since habits make them alter: certain qualities are through their nature ambiguous, through habits tending in the direction of worse or better.152

Habituation, meaning the training through the body of those irrational parts of the soul, is vital to citizenship, as it is not a subjectivity existing prior to experience that informs politics, but a subjectivity that is grounded in the world prior to one’s ability to access universal reason, “the superintendence of the body must necessarily precede that of the

151 Ibid., 25.
soul; next comes that of appetite; but that of appetite is for the sake of the intellect, and that of the body for the sake of the soul.”\textsuperscript{153}

In the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Aristotle discusses the importance of habituation again, where he argues that one learns to live ethically from childhood, “It makes, no small difference, then, to be habituated in this way or that straight from childhood, but an enormous difference, or rather all the difference.”\textsuperscript{154} One is not ethical insofar as they possess some property named “ethics”; rather they are ethical by virtue of their actions:

But we do take on the virtues by first being at work in them, just as also in other things, namely the arts; the things that one who has learned them needs to do, we learn by doing, and people become, say, housebuilders by building houses or harpists by playing the harp. So too, we become just by doing things that are just, temperate by doing things that are temperate, and courageous by doing things that are courageous. What happens in cities gives evidence of this, for lawmakers make the citizens good by habituating them, and since this is the intention of every lawmaker, those that do not do it well are failures, and one regime differs from another in this respect as a good one from a worthless one.\textsuperscript{155}

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 223.  
\textsuperscript{154} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, 23.  
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 22.
We become ethical subjects through our actions, which contain in themselves and the means by which they are enacted ethical substance. Positive ethics emerges from a conceptualization of the self that does not speak itself, communicating though the body the interests and desires of a subject prior to experience, but rather that acts itself, generating subjectivity through the moral and ethical substance of his actions.

Eschewing in a way the centrality of virtue and reason, Foucault constructs a positive ethics in which the subject navigates in and through various nodes of power relations; the means by which he or she enacts this navigation constitutes ethical behavior. It is in this field of navigation that the individual experiences freedom, “For what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom?...Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.”\(^{156}\) The freedom gained is not a freedom from power, but a freedom to strategically approach power relations in constructing the self; power, to Foucault, has properties other than repression:

> The individual is no doubt the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society; but he is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power that I have called ‘discipline’. We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represses’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact, power produces; it produces

\(^{156}\) Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 284.
reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.

The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production.¹⁵⁷

It is vital here to make a semantic distinction. The individual is created as a subject not by power, but through power. That is to say, power that is not something existing wholly outside the subject that dictates the shape of his or her life, but it is a series of relationship that exist inside and outside the individual that produces subjectivity. These relationships are themselves contingent upon a condition of freedom:

It should also be noted that power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free. If one of them were completely at the other’s disposal and became his thing, an object on which he could wreak boundless and limitless violence, there wouldn’t be any relations of power…This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, because if there were no possibilities of resistance, there would be no power relations at all.¹⁵⁸

Power and freedom form a dialectical relationship in Foucault’s late work, “if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere.”¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 194.
¹⁵⁸ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom.” 292.
¹⁵⁹ Ibid.
Ethics, then, to both the Greeks and to Foucault, is the art of living, those practices taken up in order to facilitate a proper life:

So, if we take ethics in classical Greek philosophy or medicine, what is the ethical substance? It is the *aphrodisia*, which are at the same time acts, desire, and pleasure. What is the *mode d’assujettissement*? It is that we have to build our existence as a beautiful existence; it is an aesthetic mode. You see, what I tried to show is that nobody is obliged in classical ethics to behave in such a way as to be truthful to their wives, not to touch boys, and so on. But if they want to have a beautiful existence, if they want to have a good reputation, if they want to be able to rule others, they have to do this…The choice, the aesthetic or political choice, for which they decide this kind of existence—that’s the mode d’assujettissement.

We, as subjects, are free to become good citizens or bad, we are free to accede to the desires of the established order or to resist. It is in this way that choosing to live a punk life, to live by DIY principles, is not a single discrete event, but a series of choices made and a series of practices undertaken by the individual. Foucault’s description of his project in volume 2 of The History of Sexuality, could very well be the description a

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160 Translated as mode of subjection, Foucault defines it as, “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice. (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 27)

161 Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 266.
punk makes of his or her critique of mainstream society, “The object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently.” DIY lifestyle levels its critique of mainstream society and capitalism in order to create the possibilities for new ways of living.

Several questions arise from Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics and resistance. First, if subjects are created within generative power relations, how is it that subjects will choose to resist? Amy Allen asks, “If modern power functions through the very shaping of individuality, then how is resistance to such power possible at all, given that this resistance will of necessity be carried out by individuals who have been constituted by power?” Drawing on Foucault’s later works, she answers, “If subjection is one of the principle mechanisms through which modern power operates, then to struggle for liberation will require us ‘to refuse what we are,’ to refuse to capitulate to the logic of subjection, to engage in a critical desubjectification.” She seeks to detach the process of subjection in which the individual is formed, from the experience of subjectivity. But this doesn’t answer the question; it offers a prescription for resistance, but offers no explanation why someone would choose to resist and someone else might not.

In the Psychic Life of Power, Judith Butler offers a psychoanalytic critique of Foucault’s notion of subjectivity, adding to the equation the psyche:

This viable and intelligent being, this subject, is always produced at a cost, and whatever resists the normative

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162 Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, 9.
164 Ibid.
165 Ibid., 60.
demand by which subjects are instituted remains unconscious. Thus the psyche, which includes the unconscious, is very different from the subject: the psyche is precisely what exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity, to become a coherent subject.\textsuperscript{166}

Perhaps the decision made, or at least the inhabiting of a position inclined to such decisions, whether or not to resist is contingent upon the psychic pain or damage inflicted by the process of subjection. It is here that Foucaultian ethics, in conjunction with Butler’s psychoanalytic critique, offers at least a tentative explanation for resistance:

For Foucault, the subject who is produced though subjection is not produced at an instant in its totality. Instead, it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced. It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization. The term which not only names, but forms and frames the subject…mobilizes a reverse discourse against the very regime of normalization by which it is spawned.\textsuperscript{167}

\textsuperscript{166} Butler, \textit{The Psychic Life of Power}, 86.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 93.
Disciplinary discourses, containing within them the normative ideal and its possible negations, are required to constantly repeat themselves through the individual in order to create a subject. Therefore, an individual who for whatever reason resists normalization, consciously, unconsciously, or by the nature of his or her very being, will be constantly exposed to a discourse that will by her exclusion or ill-fit produce resistance.

It is also worth considering how freedom and autonomy are conceptualized within Foucault’s understanding of ethics. If freedom is an ontological condition for ethical practices, but subjects are constituted by and within power relations, it becomes necessary to detach conceptions of freedom from those of autonomy. In Foucault’s understanding of ethics, freedom is that space within discursive structures that allows for some ability of reflection or action not strictly sanctioned by dominant order; at the same time, it is also those practices one takes on to constitute their subjectivity. It is here that there is at least some theoretical space to consider Foucault’s ethics as non-deterministic, since if the subject was entirely determined by the ways in which he or she is constituted, it would be difficult to conceive of that subject as free. Autonomy is another matter, in which Foucault could be said to give too little accounting for; traditional understandings of autonomy as the subject being able to stand outside itself and make decisions based on reason combined with a freedom from restraint cannot account for Foucault’s understanding of power as both limiting and generating the subject. One is never free from power; one simply learns to negotiate through it.
Straightedge and Ethical Practices

Culture is not only communicative; it serves to organize and order bodies in relation to one another, in relation to power relations, and in relation to one’s self. While not made explicit by early Marxist cultural critics, I think it has always been present. For example, in “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin connects the message of a work of art with the technology deployed in producing and distributing it; the effect of mass production of cultural works was to disrupt or destroy the work’s aura, which was the experience of the work’s singularity in the art world. New production and communications technologies at the time made it possible that works of art could be reproduced cheaply and easily; a move Benjamin thought politically progressive as it severed the sense of awe, which he thought conservative, from the work.168 This consideration of culture in conjunction with the material reality of its production, distribution, and enjoyment was for the most part abandoned by cultural theorists in favor of analysis of texts as hegemonic or counter-hegemonic forces.

I seek here to reassert the connection between the content of culture and the means by which it is produced, distributed, and consumed. Culture is a means not only of communicating the interests of or resistances to capital or dominant sets of ideology, it is a means of training bodies, it is a set of practices that construct individuals. There is a qualitative difference between purchasing albums at a show from someone who runs a distro and going to a Hot Topic to buy the same album; it is as important to consider the practices that go into consumption, as it is to consider the messages being uttered. The

differences between the ways in which the body is situated and trained by the culture industry and the ways the bodily is experienced at DIY punk shows are as important in discerning the political content of a form of culture as are the messages communicated through the television or at the show. Both, when taken as parts of one life, could be considered styles of living that constitute ethical activity; whether that is the ethics of a life that accedes to power or one that resists power.

In “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” Ryan Moore argues that there are two conflicting versions of punk emerging from the same conditions, yet often conflict with each other. The first is what Moore terms the culture of deconstruction, which is the face of punk the public sees:

The Sex Pistols and the original British punk subculture therefore exemplify what I have called the ‘culture of deconstruction’ in response to the condition of postmodernity, the practice of appropriating the symbols and media which have become the foundation of political economy and social order to undermine their dominant meanings and parody the power behind them.¹⁶⁹

This is the version of punk that is most apt to receive media attention or major label interest; the politics of this type of punk are essentially communicative in nature. Moore contrasts this with what he terms cultures of authenticity, which could be referred to as a constructive version of punk:

¹⁶⁹ Moore, “Postmodernism and Punk,” 311.
One cluster of punk bands and personalities screamed that they were bored, flipped the bird to everyone around them, and broke up after their first album. They were as dramatic and spectacular as the rush of consumer culture, and they vanished just as quickly. Those involved with “constructive” hardcore, on the other hand, sought to take control over what they consumed, transformed passionate consumer tastes into a basis for cultural production, and used the methods and apparatuses of commercial media for creating an underground scene they could call their own. Doing it themselves, they made the ephemeral world of consumption into a grounds for durable identities and participatory community.170

Broadly defined, both version of punk entails a style of living that constitutes the ethical content of punk subculture. The deconstructed version of punk has been given continued media and academic attention; the constructive version has been given little of either. Since constructive punk is said to have been born alongside the emergence of straightedge punk in Washington DC171, this is where I will start.

At first, straightedge hardcore might seem an odd version of punk to consider in terms of positive ethics, since it is based upon a set of negative incitements: don’t smoke,

170 Ibid., 321.
171 Ibid., 320.
don’t drink, don’t do drugs, don’t eat meat, etc. However, one can construct an ethics of subject creation through the practices straightedgers deploy in order to create their lives:

Straightedgers develop personal identities grounded in an ascetic lifestyle of not doing drugs and not engaging in promiscuous sex…abstinence composes a significant identity act in that it is not simply about the absence of doing; rather, abstinence “entails a voluntary refusal to perform act one can and is expected to do’ (Mullaney 2006).172

Foucault defines asceticism as, “an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being.”173 The scene provides, “the opportunity to make daily decisions about diet and chemical intake which continually reaffirm the tenets of the straightedge lifestyle…[it] provides a built in support system.”174 The daily bodily practices that straightedgers undergo, their involvement in DIY punk, their cultural outputs, and their interactions with each other and the scene serve to create an art of living that allows them to transform themselves as moral and political subjects.

Straightedge utterances like music, fashion, and zine-writing should be seen as constructing the moral code that informs actions; in this way, the utterance has multiple functions: it is a speaking out to the world, a critique of mainstream society, a product of

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174 Lahickey, All Ages: Reflections on Straight Edge, xx.
practices, and the construction of, reiteration of, and incitement to certain sets of behaviors that creates subjects within subculture. Sociological studies of straightedge subculture have studied the practices of the scene, but are often unclear regarding the politics of the movement; it is my hope that applying Foucault’s conception of positive ethics to these studies might better inform the way we think of the subculture and its politics.

Straightedge hardcore was my first home in punk; at the time, it was really the only game in town, since I was at the time living near Cleveland, OH. There were other punk scenes up and running, but most of them were centered around bars, which were often 18 or 21 and up; straightedge had an emphasis on youth and shows were almost exclusively all-ages. Even as a freshman in high school, life revolved around finding and consuming drugs and alcohol; since I was a new kid in town, I was excluded from that world. In addition, I was getting into radical left politics, and the anti-drug stance of straightedge appealed not only to a notion that one had to be clear minded as a political statement, but to the generational rivalry between generation X’ers and the hippie/New Left holdouts who ran activist politics at the time. Politics, for me at the time, was something to be lived, not taken up and left behind at meetings and rallies. In a way, I didn’t choose straightedge as a lifestyle; it chose me.

Straightedge: A Brief History

Straightedge emerged as and continues to be a subculture within a subculture, a critique of and within a larger critique. Beginning with two songs by the seminal Washington DC hardcore band Minor Threat, “Straightedge”: 

Straightedge: A Brief History
I’m a person just like you/ but I’ve got better things to do/ than sit around and fuck my head/ hangout with the living dead/ snort white shit up my nose/ pass out at the shows/ I don’t even think about speed/ That’s something I just don’t need/ I’ve got the straight edge.  

And “Out of Step”, “(I) Don’t smoke/ Don’t Drink/ Don’t fuck/ At least I can fucking think/…/Out of step with the world”  

Despite the protestations of Minor Threat’s singer, Ian MacKaye, “I’ve never recognized straightedge as a movement, because that was never my intention. We were a punk band”  

straightedge did emerge as something resembling a movement, quickly spreading beyond Washington DC into other, smaller scenes across the country, later becoming an international movement, or scene or sub-scene, depending on how one defines it.  

In the mid to late 80’s, the straightedge scene across the country began to decline, along with the rest the hardcore scene, members of the straightedge scene went as far as trying to start a new punk scene in order to avoid the violence and hyper-masculinity that was pervading the hardcore scene; called Revolution Summer, it was an attempt to

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175 Minor Threat, “Straight Edge.”  
176 Minor Threat, “Out of Step.”  
177 Brannon, “Interview with Ian Mackaye.”  
179 Blush, American Hardcore.
make the punk and hardcore scene more welcoming. It took a while to catch on, but one can trace parts of both the Riot Grrrl and emo scenes, emerging in the early 90’s, to Revolution Summer. Ian MacKaye, a significant figure not only in straightforward but DIY as well having started Dischord Records, claims that Revolution Summer was at least in part about trying to include people who had been previously excluded in punk, “Stop with the fucking stage diving, stop with the violence, and let everybody get to the front and have a good time.”

Straightedge experienced a resurgence in New York City from 1998-1991. The make up of the scene changed during what is known as the Hardcore Revival or Youth Crew scene from more traditional punks to a more jock aesthetic, “Kids of the Youth crew era often took on a more clean-cut image than their old-school predecessors; their carefully cut short hair, running shoes, shorts, and t-shirts sometimes evoked comparisons to jocks.” Youth Crew hardcore tended to celebrate those aspects of the hardcore scene that punks in Washington were trying to move away from: doctrinal purity, hyper-masculinity, and violence. There was also a simmering resentment between New York and Washington, as evidenced in the Gorilla Biscuits song, “New Directon”:

What do you mean it’s time, time for me to grow up?/ I don’t want any part/…/Pretending that they care about our scene just because out money’s green./ I’ll tell you stage dives make me feel more alive than coded messages in

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slowed down songs./ Now you’re so ashamed, now I’m so ashamed of you./ We believed the same things./ You stand to the side/ Rebirth of hardcore pride.\textsuperscript{183}

Two poles were emerging within the politics of hardcore, a more inclusive scene in Washington and a more conservative scene in New York; the straightedge and hardcore scenes have been negotiating this conflict ever since.

Since the early 90’s, the scene has seen several iterations: PC straightedge, a more leftist version of straightedge with ties closer to the DC scene, Vegan and Hardline straightedge, emerging in Syracuse NY in the early nineties each radicalizing one part of straightedge, metal core, emerging in the early to mid 90’s in Cleveland OH which accented the violence of the hardcore scene with satanic imagery, among several others.\textsuperscript{184} It should be noted, though, that despite stylistic differences, these scenes often coexisted in the same geographic and temporal locations, though not without conflict. In fact, this conflict often aided in the expansion of the hardcore scene to different cities; turned off by the violence the Cleveland scene prided itself on, several of us started booking shows in Kent, Akron, and Canton OH, each of which began to see its own scene develop.

Straightedge Practices

In their study of authenticity in various subcultures, Widdicombe and Wooffitt claim that subcultural members privilege being punk over doing punk; authenticity is

\textsuperscript{183} Gorilla Biscuits, “New Direction.”
\textsuperscript{184} Haenfler, \textit{Straight Edge}. 
therefore a comparative value disguised as a characteristic one possesses.\textsuperscript{185} There are no essential characteristics of punk that provide ground for one punk to claim authenticity; subculture, in fact, is almost entirely grounded in doing. One does not reach a state of ‘punkness’ or ‘straightedgeness’, instead he or she is constantly engaging in practices that constitute themselves as a member of a subculture. These practices are often in flux, the scene changes as its members change or as technology changes; one experiences straightedge differently if in a geographically bounded scene than if they were interacting over the Internet. This has lead to a privileging, for at least some, of face-to-face interaction within the scene over the building of communities online.\textsuperscript{186} What does not change is the importance of practices in building one’s identity both within and without the subculture.

Ross Haenfler lists the core values of the straightedge scene, “positivity/clean living, lifetime commitment to the movement and its values, reserving sex for caring relationships, self actualization, spreading the subculture’s message, and involvement in progressive causes.”\textsuperscript{187} Straightedge practices emerge from these values. Abstaining from alcohol or drugs is not simply a personal statement or preference, but a set of practices with social consequences. They often alienate the straightedger from others outside the subculture, ending or precluding friendships and limiting the places one might go to be social.

\textsuperscript{185} Widdicombe and Wooffitt, “‘Being’ Punk Versus ‘Doing’ Punk,” 274.
\textsuperscript{186} Williams, “Authentic Identities: Straightedge Subculture, Music, and the Internet.”
\textsuperscript{187} Haenfler, Straight Edge, 35.
The ‘X’ central in straightedge symbolism; originally worn by punks too young to drink in the bars where shows were held, it has been taken on by straightedgers as a symbol of pride in the decision they have made. But its effect is more than simple symbolism, by actively signifying difference; one marks herself out as a member of a scene both to those sympathetic and unsympathetic to it. It is the visual symbol of commitment, a marker of one who has adopted a certain set of practices. As such, wearing the ‘X’ is not only symbolic, but a practice taken up by some to mark themselves as resistant to mainstream culture. It is both speaking and doing, in that it communicates at the same time as it acts on and in the subject, reinforcing his or her commitments.

Slam-dancing is still ubiquitous at hardcore shows; it allows some to release aggression, others to experience exclusion. It acts as a means by which straightedgers enact, express, and internalize a sense of fraternity with one another; at the same time, some women often feel excluded and relegated to the periphery of the show, while others feel it is a political act to enter the pit. Punk is largely male, straightedge is almost exclusively male, while there are certainly women in the scene, there are few in bands; women tend to work backstage, often attempts to fully participate are met with criticism.

Straightedge prides itself on being anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-homophobic. This manifests itself in song lyrics, zines, and behavior at shows; those putting on shows are not likely to book bands with sexist, racist, or homophobic lyrics, those attending shows will often physically escort a band offstage or a skinhead out of the venue. But the everyday practices of straightedgers betray these politics, most are straight white males; the claim that they are indeed progressive precludes claims of exclusion.
Together, these practices aid in creating at least part of the straightedger’s subjectivity and constitute a set of ethical behaviors. Communicative content of subcultural producers constitutes a moral code or moral codes; it is the every day practices of members that become a subcultural ethics. The underground nature of the scene is in a sense that place of freedom Foucault describes as a condition of ethical behavior, as it is in a location often overlooked by mainstream society. Yet power relations are not absent from this space, nor are substantive inequalities both in numerical membership or the privileges or spaces of freedom provided for those of marginalized social groups.
CHAPTER 4: PUNK PLACES: THE ROLE OF SPACE IN SUBCULTURAL LIFE

Walking up to it, the house blended into the neighborhood, which was a collection of slightly worn rental properties, early 20th century row houses, and a few private residences. White paint chipping off the wood siding, an old Pontiac, taken up permanent residence in the yard surrounded by weeds, and several current and former gardening projects behind the car greeted anyone approaching. Bikes were seemingly strewn everywhere, attached to every conceivable spot one could conceivably lock up to. The porch had seen better days; its screens fraying in various stages of disrepair and it was filled with five gallon containers that were used to ferry food to and from Saturday Food not Bombs lunches, various bike parts, recycling bins, and gardening tools.

There were usually eight or so permanent residents, who had rooms of their own, and a collection of traveling punks, activists, and couch surfers who would come and go. If a gathering or convention were in town, people would be crashing everywhere; one might step over several people going from one room to another. Weekday mornings there would be small children playing and running through the house, several people living there provided babysitting for friends. Friday nights punks would come over and cook for Food not Bombs the next day, the living room would be filled with people chopping vegetables, the two kitchens both brimming with people cooking vegan food, chatting, and drinking beer.

The walls were littered with art projects of housemates and the kids we babysat, flyers for shows in town, and an assortment of maps, postcards, and notes from visitors. In the downstairs kitchen there was a chore sign up sheet, which would at times provoke
house meetings that could go late into the night. There were two ancient videogame consoles in the living room. Which, incidentally, was the only room in the house that hadn’t been converted into a bedroom, the procurement of these was a mystery; there were rumors, but all we could get out of the interested parties was that they were ‘reappropriated’.

My bedroom, which I couldn’t afford on my own and therefore had to sublet my bed to another housemate in favor of the couch, doubled as the house library. It had originally been a dining room that opened into the kitchen and the living room, so there were flattened cardboard boxes duct-taped to the doorway to section it off from the living room, and a throw rug hanging off the doorway to the kitchen. In our happier moments, we’d claim that privacy was bourgeois; at other times we’d just grumble as people drifted in and out. Two piles of clothes sat under the loft, one mine and the other my roommate’s, both of us having neglected to ever buy a dresser.

The basement was full of science experiments; there were several home-brewing aficionados living in the house who had taken it over after we decided we’d no longer be having punk shows down there. In a house where getting the dishes washed would provoke a four hour long meeting regarding the politics of housework, none of us really wanted to have to hash out who would have to clean up afterwards. Anyway, we were the activist house in town and there were two other punk houses in town that were focused around holding punk shows.

At the time, our house was the headquarters for Food Not Bombs, Columbus Copwatch, and a splinter faction of Anti-Racist Action. Several book clubs and sundry
other organizations held meetings in our living room as well. Columbus, while having a fairly sizable punk scene at the time for a city its size, couldn’t support its own meeting place or punk-run music venue, so most radical activism or DIY activities took place in someone’s home. House decisions were made using consensus based procedures in weekly house meetings. The house itself served to dissolve distinctions between public and private life; it was a home, a meeting place, and a site of politics. It was a means by which we could at least in limited ways live our politics and experience the possibilities of alternative ways of organizing ourselves.

If one takes seriously a notion that practices at least inform, if not constitute, political subjects, it follows that one must take the politics of place and spaces seriously; if politics is embodied and immanent, then where these practices take place potentially facilitates, colors, or discourages actions. Wendy Brown, calling for feminist political spaces, states, “Our spaces, while requiring some definition and protection, cannot be clean, sharply bounded, disembodied, or permanent: to engage postmodern modes of power and honor specifically feminist knowledges, they must be heterogenous, roving, relatively noninstitutionalized, and democratic to the point of exhaustion.”\textsuperscript{188} This conception of political spaces need not be exclusively feminist, it may facilitate development of democratic citizens. In \textit{Participation and Democratic Theory}, Carol Pateman links the expansion of sites of participatory democratic practices to the creation of a more engaged and empowered citizenry.\textsuperscript{189} Margaret Kohn claims, “Political Spaces facilitate change by creating a distinctive place to develop new identities and social,

\textsuperscript{188} Brown, \textit{States of Injury}, 50.
\textsuperscript{189} Pateman, \textit{Participation and Democratic Theory}. 
symbolic, and experiential dimensions of space. Transformative politics comes from
separating, juxtaposing, and recombining these dimensions.” 190

The desire to create places, whether they are bounded in physical space by walls
or simply collections of people whose temporary association creates a provisional sense
of place out within already coded space, is an under-theorized aspect of subcultural
studies. Sartorial resistance to hegemony has a dual function, it is resistance and at the
same time the creation of sites of resistance by the collecting together of resistant subjects
in a given location in time and space. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, “Space is transformed
into place as it acquires definition and meaning.” 191  Punks, whether at shows, at home,
or inhabiting other spaces, create places for themselves within liberal or capitalist spaces.
A punk show transforms a rented room at the local YMCA or VFW hall or a concert
venue into a punk space, a site of conviviality, of contestation, and of the dissemination
of ideas. As familiarity turns a collection of homes and businesses transforms place into
neighborhood, the sight of punks hanging out, the layout of merch 192 tables as one enters
the show, the sound of a band playing, transforms space into punk place. Punk places
create, transform, and strengthen punks as political subjects; they are the spaces in which,
it is hoped, one feels comfortable and safe to express one’s self.

This chapter will begin with a meditation on the connections of space, the subject,
and the political. Then, utilizing Kohn’s conception of heterotopias of resistance, I will
describe how punk spaces play a role in creating resistant political subjects by providing

190 Kohn, Radical Space: Building the House of the People, 4.
191 Tuan, Space and Place, 136.
192 Merch, short for merchandise, is the popular way of referring to anything bought or
sold at a show.
them with a shelter from dominant discourse in which they can experience in some way the possibilities of social and political change through daily habits and the development of localized knowledges. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of 924 Gilman, a punk-run music venue and community space in Berkeley, California.

As the first wave of punk in New York and London gave way, at least in America, to hardcore, the more obvious connections between punk and Situationist International were severed. The semiotic attack of punk upon the dominant order became much more about creating livable spaces, since the locus of the punk scene moved from the city to the suburbs. Punk, in its critique of suburban life, maintained a tacit connection to the Situationist critique of urban life. A Situationist tract reads:

In old neighborhoods, the streets have degenerated into highways, and leisure is commercialized and adulterated by tourism. Social relations there become impossible. Newly built neighborhoods have only two themes, which govern everything: traffic circulation and household comfort. They are the meager expressions of bourgeois happiness and lack any concern for play.

And it is translated by the Descendents as, “I want to be stereotyped/ I want to be classified/ I wanna be a clone/ I want a suburban home.” The politics of punk, as time

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193 Marcus, *Lipstick Traces*.  
194 Constant, “A Different City for a different Life,” 95.  
195 Descendents, “Suburban Home.”
wears on, becomes less a semiotic or textual affair and more an attempt to forge behaviors and places.

This move towards a focus on behaviors and places serves to displace cultural studies, since it is committed to a textual reading of subculture. According to Lefebvre:

When codes worked up from literary texts are applied to spaces…we remain, as may be shown, on the purely descriptive level. Any attempt to use such codes as a means of deciphering social space must surely reduce that space itself to the status of a message, and the inhabiting of it to the status of a reading. This is to evade both history and practice.¹⁹⁶

However, the analysis of punk as text is not to be dismissed entirely, it provides tools useful for discerning the ways in which visual signifiers define or limit spaces, as well as a means for identifying the sorts of discourses deployed in the creation of a given space. Lefebvre offers a conceptualization of social space that implies the ways in which it is to be studied:

(Social) space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity – their (relative) order and/or (relative) disorder. It is the outcome of a sequence and set

¹⁹⁶ Lefebvre, The Production of Space, 7.
of operations, and thus cannot be reduced to the rank of a simple object…Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and prohibiting yet others.  

The advantage to treating space as more than a ‘thing’ is that it leaves open the possibility of change. Changes in social attitudes, politics, economics, and technology all have the potential to change the ways in which space is produced, defined, and inhabited. This conception also allows one to posit that space is potentially constitutive of political subjects; the practices of subjects are at least partially contingent upon the spaces in which they take place. If those practices are in some way subject-making, place has a role to play in its facilitation of actions.

What exactly are we studying when we consider space? David Harvey offers three categories of space (and space-time): Absolute, which describes relatively static things existing in the world, relative, which describes the movement of a thing through space and time, and relational, in which time and space become inseparable. These three categories are utilized to describe material phenomena and offer little in the way of explanation regarding less tangible phenomena like feeling or experience. Harvey then describes Lefebvre’s tripartite division of space:

Material space (the space of experience and of perception open to physical touch and sensation); the representation of space (space as conceived and represented); and spaces of

197 Ibid., 73.
198 Harvey, “Space as a Key Word,” 121-125.
representation (the lived space of sensations, the
imagination, emotions, and meanings incorporated into
how we live day by day).199

He then offers a conceptualization of space in which, “we place the threefold division of
absolute, relative, and relational space-time up against the tripartite division of
experienced, conceptualized and lived space.”200

This definition of space allows a bit more precision when describing it. We could
describe a show taking place at a VFW hall (the intersection of absolute and material
space), the experience or feeling one gets by inhabiting that space (absolute spaces and
spaces of representation), touring networks that brought a band to the show (relative and
material), the feeling one gets traveling to or from the show (relative and lived) as well as
the memories of past shows as they color the present (relational and lived). This
approach enables one to think about spaces and the ways in which one experiences them
dialectically, each combination leading to many different possible outcomes.

It is also worth considering two changes in the ways in which we experience
space and place in contemporary America that shape the resistant nature of punk
subculture in its relationships with spatiality. First are the ways in which information
technologies have changed both the ways we experience and the ways we act in space.
Joshua Meyrowitz, combining the insights of McLuhan and Goffman in No Sense of
Place, contends that electronic media like radio and television have radically diminished
the role of physical space in modern life. Second, Margaret Kohn argues that the

199 Ibid., 130.
200 Ibid., 133.
increasing privatization of public places, from the commons to the shopping mall, have diminished democratic possibilities in modern America. Punk can be considered a reaction to both phenomena, in a way making a rather conservative move toward a reconstruction of place and the public sphere.

In “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin posits a connection between the effect of art and the means by which it is produced; new technologies enabled the mass production of works of art which served to change the ways in which it is experienced. Joshua Meyrowitz takes this argument a step further, arguing that the ways in which we experience the world are in part contingent upon communications technologies. Print, radio, television, and the Internet have progressively shrunk the world and changed the ways we live in it. The world is at our fingertips from inside the home, which dissolves hard and fast divisions between the public and private spheres. Since we need not exit the private sphere to access the public, the need to move physically into a public sphere is diminished.

Meyrowitz states, “electric media affect social behavior—not through the power of their messages but by reorganizing the social settings in which people interact and by weakening the once strong relationship between physical place and social ‘place’.”201 Electronic media collapses distances in absolute/material space, leading to changes in the ways we experience those places and distances in relational/lived spaces:

Movement from situation to situation and from social status to social status once involved movement from place to

201 Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place, ix.
place. A place defined a distinct situation because its boundaries limited perception and interaction...Like all electronic media, the telegraph not only defies limits formerly set by distance, but also bypasses the social rite of ‘passage,’ that is, the act of moving both physically and socially from one ‘position’ to another.202

This collapse of real and represented space and time is accelerated with each advance and technology; absolute space is rendered smaller and smaller until it is accessible in representational forms in its entirety within the home. One need never leave the home to experience the world, or at least to experience it as simulacrum:

Those entering many new places no longer find them informationally special. Places visited for the first time now look familiar if they (or places like them) have already been seen on television. And places that were once very different are now more similar because nearly every place has a television set, radio, and telephone...Those aspects of group identity, socialization, and hierarchy that were once dependent on particular physical locations and the special experiences available in them have been altered by electronic media.203

202 Ibid., 116.
203 Ibid., 125.
In some ways, this could be seen as a victory of the Enlightenment, our abstracted selves now have access to the entirety of the world without ever having to leave the private sphere. Experience becomes divorced from material reality, or at least altered by it in such a way as to negate the necessity for physical interaction with it.

It is not only technology that is changing places and our experiences of them; liberalism is also playing a role in diminishing the role of space. Iris Marion Young posits the city as a normative idea opposed to welfare capitalism, which is “atomistic, depoliticized, fostering self-regarding interest-group pluralism and bureaucratic domination,” in favor of a conception of city life that “instantiates social relations of difference without exclusion.” Eliding the more homogenizing aspects of communitarian politics, Young posits that it is city life that can best balance the need for individual and public spaces, as one can be a member of a given enclave yet must necessarily interact with citizens different from them. However, the increasing privatization of the public sphere is shrinking, if not eliminating entirely, public spaces in which people are forced or at least have the opportunity to interact.

In *Brave New Neighborhoods*, Margaret Kohn argues that public spaces that once fostered democratic subjects are being replaced by private spaces fostering private subjects, not through any act of the state but by the logic of capital:

> The technology of the automobile, the expansion of the federal highway system, and the growth of residential suburbs has changed the way Americans live. Today the

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204 Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, 226.
205 Ibid., 227.
only place that many Americans encounter strangers is in
the shopping mall. The most important public place is now
private.206

Access to these new privatized public spaces is often contingent upon one’s ability to
pay, or at least to appear as one able or willing to pay, to enter, “The private sector may
be able to provide social spaces but it is unable to provide public spaces, for example,
places where all citizens can come together…As long as entrepreneurs sell collective
goods at market prices there will be market segmentation based on ability to pay.”207
Privatized spaces segregate along class lines, and others, providing not just a set of goods
but also a sense of place in which one’s comfort is predicated upon the absence of the
other.

The privatization of public spaces stunts the growth of a polity and shifts the goal
of public life from critical engagement with one’s neighbors to comfort provided by
insularity:

Public space strengthens a democratic polity by providing a
forum for dissenting views. But public space has another
equally significant, albeit more illusive, effect. It
influences the way that we are constituted as subjects and
the way we identify with others. The privatization of

206 Kohn, Brave New Neighborhoods, 70.
207 Ibid., 196.
public space narrows our sensibility by diminishing the opportunities to encounter difference.\textsuperscript{208}

Emboldened by the collapse of space facilitated by electronic media, it seems that citizens are more and more willing to accept mediated representations of the other than to leave their insulated world and meet such people face to face.

Punk, to a certain extent, is a reaction to the changes to space and place that Meyrowitz and Kohn write about. As a youth subculture, historically, it lacks the capital to utilize effectively a great deal of electronic media; aside from the occasional pirate radio station or public access television show punk is in a way stuck in the print age.\textsuperscript{209} It also privileges geographical difference insofar as the lack of a homogenizing technology facilitates different scenes in different locations. Different scenes produce different bands, different zines, and different fashions, each with particular histories, politics, and styles.\textsuperscript{210} The DC sound is different from mid-western emo, which is different from New York Hardcore. For a while, vegan straightedge was synonymous with Syracuse NY.

The ritual of going to a punk show is also a return to the importance of rites of passage; punks may be located in the suburbs or rural areas and must travel to a city for shows; the power of physical spaces reassert themselves within subcultural experience.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{209} This has changed since the late 90’s, the Internet has begun to act as a homogenizing force in the punk scene and has changed the need for physical places to a limited extent; the centrality of the punk show to the punk scene having somewhat mitigated a total change in the scene. It is yet unclear what the long term effects the internet will have on the scene, though it is at least in part blamed for the increasing difficulties of punk print publications.
\textsuperscript{210} O’Connor, “Local Scenes and Dangerous Crossroads: Punk and Theories of Cultural Hybridity.”
Narratives of attending shows often focus in some way on a sense of place, whether the journey to the show:

Once we got to Philly, we switched trains to head to the Northeast, getting off at the Margaret/Orthodox stop in Frankford. We had no idea where we were going, blindly following all the other punks into some uncharted territory far from home. It wasn’t until the mid-90’s that I figured out where the hell this place really was.211

Or the experience of entering it, “From the moment I entered Club Pizazz and saw the turmoil of ‘da pit,’ I was struck by one life defining thought: I fucked up.”212 In this way, punk is an attempt to re-establish a sense of place, to create both a feeling of home and a space for contestation and self-expression.

What struck me about my first show was not the music, but the sense of place. I could listen to records at home; the show provided a space for me to meet the sorts of people I wasn’t about to encounter in the rural/suburban town I was living in then. In between sets, kids huddled around merch tables, buying zines and records from the bands themselves. The front stage/back stage distinction being virtually non-existent since we were in a YMCA. In fact, at most DIY shows, there wasn’t a stage at all; the band and the crowd shared the same space. In fact, at larger shows or fests213, which often

212 Gervasi, “Clenched Fists, Open Eyes: My First Punk Show,” 55.
213 “Fest,” short for festival, is typically a weekend-long series of shows at one location featuring anywhere from fifteen to thirty bands. For a large fest, punks often travel cross-country.
necessitated the rental of an actual concert venue, bands often opted to play on the floor with the audience.

In this way, the punk show is a phenomenon quite different from other performative arts; the music itself was often not the most important thing going on, though it was certainly the catalyst for bringing people together. There were, depending on the size of the show, what could appear to be an ad hoc market place of merch tables. At fests there might be classes on DIY home brewing, or self-defense, political organizing, or anarchist decision-making structures.

These spaces, however, are still in a way private. Although anyone is allowed to enter, punk is a largely white, male, straight, and middle-class subculture; those belonging to a different social group often do not feel particularly welcome. Further, since these spaces are also based around punk music, and therefore still follow the logic of market segmentation; people with little interest in loud music would probably not ever consider attending. Punk is not attempting to reconstruct the public sphere, but to create spaces where at least some people can experience something that they feel resembles a community.

In *Radical Space*, Margaret Kohn speaks of Italian houses of the people, which are autonomous socialist spaces, as appropriated spaces:

They are produced by ordinary people, using a set of skills adapted to a particular context and acquired gradually through experimentation and revision. Their diversity reflects the conditions under which they were produced-the
unique combination of human creativity, inherited experience, and available resources applied to meet immediate goals.\textsuperscript{214}

Seeking to explain the nature of provisionally emancipatory spaces in such a way that does not neglect the situatedness of even liberatory spaces within networks of power, Kohn adopts Michel Foucault’s notion of heterotopia as a framework. Her conception of heterotopias of resistance is a place that is:

- a real countertoosite that inverts and contests existing economic or social hierarchies. Its function is social transformation rather than escapism, containment, or denial. By challenging the conventions of the dominant society, it can be an important locus of struggle against normalization.\textsuperscript{215}

It is my contention that, for some, punk places are in their own particular manner heterotopias of resistance which function as sites of subject-constituting knowledges and practices, serving not as firm structures outside dominant discursive power, but as ad hoc shelters in which members of a subculture can experience some semblance of freedom.

Foucault, attempting to describe spaces, “endowed with the curious property of being in relation with all the others, but in such a way as to suspend, neutralize, or invert the set of relationships designed, reflected, or mirrored by themselves,”\textsuperscript{216} names two

\textsuperscript{214} Kohn, \textit{Radical Space: Building the House of the People}, 89.
\textsuperscript{215} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{216} Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” 352.
types: utopias, “arrangements which have no real space…They represent society itself brought to perfection, or its reverse, and in any case utopias are spaces that are by their very essence fundamentally unreal,” and heterotopias, which he describes as “a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable.” Heterotopias have several properties, some of which contribute to a notion of liberatory spaces. Using the example of a garden, Foucault posits that “The heterotopia has the power of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations that are incompatible with each other.” The garden, in this example, contains within its small physical space the representation or experience of the entirety of nature; the punk place houses within its walls possibilities unexpressed or impossible in current modes of living. Heterotopias are also at the same time isolated and penetrable simultaneously, “having the appearance of pure and simple opening, although they usually conceal curious exclusions.” Finally, he notes a paradoxical feature of the heterotopia, it at once undermines what is typically understood as real space while at the same time creating its own real spaces, which he describes as spaces, “not one of illusion but compensation.”

Foucault’s conception of heterotopia eludes normative claims involved in conceptualizing liberatory spaces; he uses cemeteries, gardens, motel rooms, brothels, and colonies as examples. The heterotopia is divorced from any one partisan goal, left or right; however, he cites the heterotopia as, “the greatest reserve of imagination for our
civilization…where it is lacking, dreams dry up, adventure is replaced by espionage, and privateers by the police.”

Without shelters from power, without the opportunity for resistance, we are left with totalitarian dominance.

In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey takes Foucault to task for positing spaces that exist outside of normative power, as well as for the lack of normative emphasis regarding these spaces:

It presumes that connections to the dominant social order are or can be severed, attenuated or, as in the prison, totally inverted. The presumption is that power/knowledge is or can be dispersed and fragmented into spaces of difference. It presumes that whatever happens in such spaces of ‘Otherness’ is of interest and even in some sense ‘acceptable,’ or ‘appropriate.’ The cemetery and the concentration camp, the factory, the shopping malls and Disneylands, Jonestown, the militia camps…are all sites of alternative ways of doing things and therefore in some sense ‘hetertopic.’

He argues that the open definition of heterotopia renders it analytically useless and politically suspect. Harvey is correct to suggest that this conceptualization of space is possibly too broad, but his critique that “it gives no clues to what a more spatiotemporal

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222 Ibid.
223 Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, 184-185.
utopianism might look like,\footnote{Ibid., 185.} seems unfair considering this was not Foucault’s goal. One might experience freedom in one heterotopia, while another person might find it oppressive. In addition, it seems myopic to hold that those with less liberatory politics might not seek to use similar strategies for their goals; one of the fascinating parts of punk politics might be its connection with skinhead culture, both of which adopt DIY practices. A more general conception of space might be instructive in making distinctions regarding the ways two or more groups, which could be at times very similar yet politically in opposition to one another, could utilize similar spaces for very different ends.

Kohn responds to Harvey’s critique of Foucault by developing a conception of heterotopias of resistance, those heterotopias based around facilitating the production of politicized subject through spatiotemporal contours and the possibilities they open up. Italian houses of the people, for example:

> Were not closed, isolated units but rather sites in which the dominant reality was represented and contested. They symbolized the socialist belief in a future society in which production and consumption, work and leisure, politics and pageantry, would be reintegrated…The houses of the people served to embody the concept of democracy that remained only rhetorical in the polity.\footnote{Kohn, Radical Space, 92.}
The conception of heterotopia allows one to reconcile the ways in which spaces can at once be resistant and in some ways and at the same time remain sites of power, exclusion, and normalization. Power never disappears; the gaps we take shelter in might shield us from certain discourses but not others. It is in this way that the concept of heterotopia seems most compelling; it allows greater precision in describing spaces and their relative value as sites of resistance. It also points out those small moments that may not seem ostensibly political:

Part of the political effectiveness of the house of the people was precisely to make the most basic elements of social life, such as drinking a glass of wine in company, into an act of identification with socialism, at least in the broader sense of a popular movement for economic change and political inclusion of the working classes.\(^\text{226}\)

Heterotopias of resistance serve not only to connect the political with the everyday and real spaces as well as a site of provisional freedom of practice, but also to protect local knowledges and serve as a site of their development and dissemination. Heterotopias of resistance provide the back stages and shelters that dissident knowledges and discourses require.\(^\text{227}\) In addition, they allow not only for the communication of such knowledges, but their development as well, “paying close attention to political acts that are disguised or offstage helps us to map a realm of possible dissent...we will typically

\(^{226}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{227}\) Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance.*
find the social and normative basis for practical forms of resistance as well as the values that might, if conditions permitted, sustain more dramatic forms of rebellion.”

Punk is in its own way, a site of localized knowledges and practices that stand in resistance to the culture industry and dominant order. The culture industry, deploying modern marketing techniques and demographic studies, attempts to be everything to everyone, a move not only toward aesthetic homogenization but toward a disciplining of bodies and knowledges to create desirable subjects. Punk spaces facilitate what Foucault calls popular knowledges, those particular, local, disqualified knowledges that may stand in opposition to dominant discourse. It is this sheltering that serves as one qualification of punk spaces as political spaces, despite the problems it faces (and creates) because of its exclusive nature, they serve as repositories for sets of localized knowledges that can potentially serve to undermine dominant generalizable discourses. James Scott refers to these knowledges as ‘metis’, which are local, practical, specialized knowledges obtained through practices repeated over time. In a Foucaultian sense, the development and protection of these knowledges serves itself as a type of resistance to a dominant society that seeks to replace localized, conditional knowledges with universal truths.

A Punk Place: 924 Gilman

If you've got nothing better to do there's a meeting every Sunday afternoon and you can make a speech you can rant

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228 Ibid., 20.
229 Foucault, “Two Lectures.” 82.
230 Scott, Seeing Like a State, 309-317
you can rave you can preach at Gilman Street it's
democracy it's just one big family it's a bunch of geeks it's a
load of freaks it's a club it's a place it's a thing it's Gilman
Street.\textsuperscript{231}

Punk places tend not to last long, punks come and go and typically wreck the place. There are a few places that have lasted more than a few years: the Dischord house, home of Dischord records, ABC No Rio, a venue in New York City, and 924 Gilman St., a collectively run venue in Berkeley, California as well as several others across the country. For those of us punks in the Midwest, trying desperately to create and maintain scenes and spaces, 924 Gilman was a model, an inspiration, and a glimmer of hope. It was not only a punk space that managed to survive, but to survive by following its own rules.

Started in 1986 by \textit{MaximumRocknRoll} creator and editor Tim Yohannon, 924 Gilman has survived several battles with local businesses, the city government, various skinheads and malcontents, a hostile social and political climate, and gentrification. It has remained constant through changes in style, in politics, and in people and survived the pop-punk boom in the early 90’s that took place within its walls; it was once home to East Bay pop-punk bands like Green Day, Operation Ivy, and Rancid. It was often a site of internecine conflict within the scene, fights about what counted as punk, fights about politics, inclusion, and exclusion, it was a site of conflict; its association with MRR meaning that punks across the country and the world would often read about the most

\textsuperscript{231} Mr. T Experience, “Gilman St.”
mundane details of day to day operations, petty arguments between staff members, and plenty of gossip.

American punk and hardcore was in the doldrums in 1986, the year 924 Gilman opened. Citing an increasingly routinized, apolitical scene, Yohannon argued for a reinjection of the political into punk:

> When I leave a show, I want my brain and imagination to be as exercised as my body. That would be really radical. Lyrics and good intentions aren’t enough. It’s time for a whole new front, a humorous, biting, multidimensional, and imaginative way to confront our society-right there at the show. If gigs are boring and staid, redefine them and it’ll rejuvenate punk. It’s the dimension we’ve all been wanting—not a whole new form of music, but a whole new way of delivering it.\(^\text{232}\)

Yohannon eventually gave up control over Gilman, leading to a procession of different owners, but much has stayed the same. The space would not book racist, misogynist, or homophobic bands or tolerate those behaviors from those attending, though it should be noted that often this rule had the effect of depoliticizing the space and hampering those who felt that such injunctions did little to address less visible forms of discrimination within the scene. Gilman St. rules and practices were decided by democratically run

meetings every other Sunday, at which any member could attend and participate.\textsuperscript{233} If someone could not afford to pay the door, they were allowed in at a reduced rate if they agreed to work in some capacity during or after the show.

924 Gilman Street was not only a social space, but also a space in which one could develop skills and practical knowledges:

I’ve learned a lot of practical things from Gilman. Mixing sound is a good skill to have; even if you don’t use the knowledge to actually mix sound, a lot of the experience carries over and can help with recording, playing, or just appreciating music. I’ve also learned a lot about keeping equipment going: fixing and cleaning electrical equipment like the soundboard, DIs and various adapters, cables, and connectors; cannibalizing mic stands; having copious amounts of duct tape on hand.\textsuperscript{234}

Taking part in decision-making meetings also served as training in participatory democratic decision-making, something increasingly hard to find in a market-driven liberal order.

Popular culture within liberal democracies, though it plays a significant role in constituting political subjects, functions slightly differently from other sites of power relations. It constantly desires the new, the novel to be incorporated and commodified into mainstream culture, thereby providing more gaps and shelters within its domain.

\textsuperscript{233} Edge, \textit{924 Gilman: The Story so Far}, 375-377.
\textsuperscript{234} Joe G. in \textit{924 Gilman}, 353.
Youth culture, in a way, is given more freedom for resistance than in other parts of life. It is this, in part, that allows for subcultural spaces to emerge, and for some of these to actually become heterotopias of resistance.

Punk places provide a shelter from the more homogenizing aspects of capital. They are sites within the dominant order that at the same time function as a series of glimpses at the possibilities of different ways of living. They operate in such a way as to unify, at times, disparate activities into modes and practices of resistance. 924 Gilman is just one example of a punk place that emphasizes the ways in which culture is done, not just spoken; the ways in which people live possibilities unavailable to them in dominant culture.
CHAPTER 5: PUNK AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

As the American hardcore scene of the late 1980’s wound down, its relatively homogenous political, demographic, and stylistic composition was replaced to some extent by the emergence of different social groups becoming visible within the greater punk scene. Riot Grrrl, a feminist scene emerging within punk in the early 1990’s in Olympia WA and Washington DC around a handful of bands and zines, set out not just to critique male dominance or misogyny in the scene, but to create and facilitate spaces and practices within punk towards explicitly feminist ends.\textsuperscript{235} While some would describe it as a breakaway scene\textsuperscript{236}, it would be better described as an emergent sub-scene within punk subculture since it shares many of the same practices, aesthetics, and spaces of the larger punk scene. In addition, to describe it as separate from punk serves to downplay the influence it had on the scene as a whole. “Riot Grrrl is…” serves as a manifesto, not as a set of directing principles emerging from a coherent movement, but as what might best be described as a set of concerns around which a group coalesced:

BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US, that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other’s work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.

\textsuperscript{235} Garafalo and Rosenberg, “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,” Klein, “Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community,” and Zobl, “Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!.”

\textsuperscript{236} Leblanc, Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture, 64.
BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are making impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.

BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit Christian capitalist way of doing things.

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged, in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beergutboyrock that tells us that we can’t play our instruments, in the face of The Man who says our bands and zines are “the worst” things he’s seen and claims the only reason we exist is to profit from girlzine bandwagon hype.

BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (Boy) standards of what is or isn’t “good” music or punk
rock or “good” writing AND THUS need to create forums where we can recreate, destroy, and define our own visions. BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock “you can do anything” idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours. BECAUSE we are interested in creating non hierarchical ways of being AND making music, friends, and scenes based on communication+understanding, instead of competition+good/bad categorizations. BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodyism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives. BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead
of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards.\(^{237}\)

I include this statement almost in its entirety for several reasons. In terms of the punk scene, this is hardly a radical statement. Setting aside appeals to equality, this is a statement in favor of the inclusion of women in the scene. In so doing, it ties together the politics of practices with a larger critique of mainstream culture. Second, the argument combines an overlapping criticism of sexism and misogyny of both mainstream culture and the ways in which punk often reinstatates power relations or inequalities from the dominant order. Subcultures, as their name implies, do not exist outside of already existing power relations; the challenge is often to tease out the ways in which critique from within a given state of affairs carries with it the very forms of power it seeks to critique. Third, taken as an (almost) whole, this manifesto marries punk and feminist critique in an uneasy but potentially productive manner. Political purchase, in this statement, comes not from ontological presence, but from the critical engagement of resistant practices. Last, in a chapter in which listening and patience are skills learned in order to create democratic citizens, I am hesitant to rush through a statement better read as a whole.

In an interview with in Punk Planet Kathleen Hanna, singer for Bikini Kill and one of the founders (if such a term is even appropriate) of riot grrrl, states, “I don’t believe in reformism. I don’t just want my piece of the pies. I believe in revolutionary action…the ultimate goal is that we change the entire system…unless we build models-

\(^{237}\) Riot Grrrl, “Riot Grrrl is…” 178-180.
even small little Lego ones in our houses—we’re not going to figure out how that’s going to come about.” This seems like an apt metaphor (if a little glib) not only for the politics of the Riot Grrrl scene, but for punk politics as well.

Any notion of punk politics is in constant danger of becoming incoherent and self-contradictory; after the diffusion of punk from a few cities into new scenes, each with particular interests, politics, and styles, there are simply too many sub-genres to create a legible definition. Additionally, this construction of politics around punk privileges the utterances of bands and zine writers over the everyday politics of punk subculture. Instead, I will try to find moments of what Sheldon Wolin and Chantal Mouffe each term the political. Utilizing an understanding of resistance that posits that actors are socially and politically constructed within already existing power relations from Foucault, it is my contention that punk provides moments of political resistance that can serve as a ground upon which a democratic ethic can be constructed within a cultural and political context that discourages conflict and democratic contestation.

This chapter will begin by first defining Wolin and Mouffe’s respective constructions of the political, and how Foucault’s insights regarding power, resistance, and ethics can be deployed to create a notion of resistant democratic ethics. I will then explore and expand upon Mark Mattern’s conceptualization of the connections between popular music and community-based politics. Following from this, I will explore the role of boundaries in both limiting and facilitating democracy both in terms of space and means of communication. Finally, I will analyze the function of listening in democratic politics.

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238 Sinker, “Interview with Kathleen Hanna,” 69.
politics as theorized by Benjamin Barber and Susan Bickford. It is my hope that a critical engagement between punk subculture and citizenship will be found by looking not only at punk utterances, but in finding and analyzing punk practices.

In the 1980’s and 90’s, as Americans were becoming less and less involved in community activities and public life, at least one form of teenage rebellion was beginning to take community life seriously. Punks were getting together at shows, starting record labels with friends, and creating distribution and touring networks throughout the country. Putnam argues that social capital, the sum of social relationships, community feeling, trust and good will created by a robust community life and civic engagement was on the decline in the US during the same period as the punk scene was putting more and more emphasis on it.

It is my contention here that whether or not we have some natural proclivity to social life, we become citizens through the practices we take part in. In turn, the nature of those practices and the circumstances or existing relationships of power we find ourselves in shape what sort of citizens we become. As civic engagement was on the decline in mainstream America, it was on the rise in at least this one resistant subculture. Read in this way punk became a site of the possible creation of a resistant democratic ethic.

Defining an Ethics of Democratic Resistance

It may be helpful here to define several terms. I will define the political using a combination of Sheldon Wolin’s and Chantal Mouffe’s conceptualizations. Wolin begins

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239 Putnam, *Bowling Alone.*

240 Ibid., 19-24.
by making a distinction between politics and the political. Politics is the “legitimized and public contestation, primarily by organized and unequal social powers, over access to the resources available to the public authorities of the collectivity,” while he defines the political as “an expression of the idea that a free society composed of diversities can nonetheless enjoy moments of commonality when, through public deliberations, collective power is used to promote or protect the well-being of the collectivity.” The political, to Wolin, is bounded by both space and time; it exists in moments, which is to say that the political is in a way contingent upon limits that contain and exclude in such a way to create a coherent polity, “boundaries work to foster the impression of a circumscribed space in which likeness dwells, the likeness of natives…or of citizens with equal rights.” Wolin here is talking about the political at the macro level, but it does not seem much a stretch to apply this bounded nature of the political to the micro level as well. Sub-cultures, for example, rely on spatial, temporal, sartorial, and cultural boundaries to contain likeness and exclude others, creating a politics grounded in commonality.

However, there are deleterious consequences to this boundary creating; if we are speaking of subculture only as an originating space for utterances, the clear lines of division allow for a coherence of the speaker or speakers’ identity or position. On the other hand, if we treat subculture as a set of practices and spaces, this exclusion can privilege certain groups over others; in the case of punk, it can lead to the exclusion of all

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242 Ibid.
243 Ibid., 33.
but white, middle-class, young men. Here it becomes useful to refer to Chantal Mouffe’s conception of the political, which is centered on conflict, “any type of we/them relation, be it religious, ethnic, national, economic or other, becomes the site of a political antagonism.” Her conception, more explicitly than Wolin’s, broadens the scope of politics from the state to all manner of social relationships, “the political cannot be restricted to a certain type of institution, or envisaged as constituting a specific sphere or level of society. It must be conceived as a dimension that is inherent to every human society and that determines our very ontological condition.”

Boundaries function much in the same way in Mouffe’s conception as in Wolin’s, difference, which Mouffe sees as the engine of politics, relies on boundaries delineating self/other, we/them, etc. Seen in this way, politics is at least in part contingent upon boundaries; liberal attempts to eliminate or obfuscate boundaries by appeals to universality or rationality function in this way to eliminate the political. The key it would seem, for a viable politics, would be to have boundaries that are not necessarily hard and fast, but rather malleable in the face of political contestation. In order for the notion of citizen to exist one must have an understanding of the non-citizen, the key is for that understanding to be willing or able to change over time.

Democracy is then one way of interacting within the political in which people are set out to resolve a given problem all the while negotiating the relationship between the pulls of commonality and difference. Like the political, democracy is a bounded

244 Mouffe, *The Return of the Political*, 3.
245 Ibid.
phenomenon that manifests in different times, locations and circumstances. Wolin argues:

Perhaps, then, democracy should be about forms rather than a form or constitution; and, instead of an institutionalized process, it should be conceived as a moment of experience, a crystallized response to deeply felt grievances or needs…Its moment is not just a measure of fleeting time but an action that protests actualities and reveals possibilities.246

Mouffe makes a similar claim while critiquing deliberative democracy for treating the political as a means to make consensus, and therefore privileging the consequence over the process, “the only way is to envisage democratic citizenship form a different perspective, on that puts the emphasis on the types of practices and not the forms of argumentation.”247

Wolin, arguing that citizenship is not ontologically prior to the political, states:

Becoming a citizen…merely confirmed a prior status.

Tocqueville, in contrast, suggested that democratic citizenship had to be conceived differently, not as an antecedent or “natural” status or even as a subsequent

247 Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, 96
creature of law. Democratic citizenship was, instead, a process of becoming.\textsuperscript{248}

Mouffe covers much the same ground, predicking its necessity upon the nature of power in the modern world:

Coming to terms with the constitutive nature of power implies relinquishing the ideal of a democratic society as the realization of a perfect harmony or transparency. The democratic character of a society can only be given by the fact that no limited social actor can attribute to herself or himself the representation of the totality and claim to have the ‘mastery’ of the foundation.\textsuperscript{249}

Both conceptions of democracy place the subject and his or her development as a democratic citizen squarely in material existence rather than prior to it.

In approaching democratic politics in this way, I am not trying to replace Wolin’s emphasis on the political as the site of commonality with Mouffe’s emphasis on difference and conflict, but to suggest a necessary tension implicit in a democratic politics’ need to construct and negotiate boundaries. It is this tension, whose resolution, contra deliberative democrats, is neither desirable nor possible; it instead acts as the motivating force for democratic activity. Every time we find some sort of commonality, new differences emerge and restart the process. If we locate citizenship in the engagement with the political instead of some substance or standing possessed prior to

\textsuperscript{248} Wolin, \textit{The Politics of Vision}, 596.
\textsuperscript{249} Mouffe, \textit{The Democratic Paradox}, 100.
the political, then continued conflict is a necessity for continued existence of democratic citizens.

It may be instructive here to consider Foucault’s notion of governmentality, in which government is:

The right disposition of things…The things with which in this sense government is to be concerned are in fact men, but men with their relations, their links, their imbrication with those other things which are wealth, resources means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.; men in their relation to that other kind of things, customs, habits, ways of acting and thinking, etc.250

A liberal state, or even modern welfare state capitalism, cannot account for the myriad ways of dictating and creating the “right disposition of things.” The state, as the assumed head of government, is no longer concerned with justice or right, but with, “a right manner of disposing things so as to lead not to the form of the common good, as the jurist’s texts would have said, but to an end which is ‘convenient’ for each of the things that are to be governed.”251 Government is no longer handled solely by the state, but a myriad of state agencies and social institutions to create subjects and things that are governable.

250 Foucault, “Governmentality,” 93.
251 Ibid. 95.
In this understanding of government, it becomes imperative that subjects are made to be governable. Amy Allen puts it this way, “Disciplinary power plays a crucial role in this new art of government; with its myriad techniques for disciplining individual bodies, disciplinary power makes possible biopower’s management of populations.” As the power of the sovereign diffuses into power relations between citizens and institutions and their attendant discourses deploying expertise in controlling the disposition of things, the possibilities for resistance spread away from the state towards disciplinary mechanisms. This radically expands the field of the political; if one conceptualizes the culture industry under late capitalism as one site of the creation of the right disposition of things, as it dictates the right orientation of bodies and discourses in the spread of images and sets of practices involved in producing and consuming its products, then punk subculture can be understood as a form of resistance to it.

Resistance is formed and takes place within already existing power relations; it does not stand outside of them. Foucault posits, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” Resistance is never quite free of power; in fact it is contingent upon it. Democracy, as it stands here a bounded interaction of citizens in the political towards certain ends, could be read as a form of resistance to modern governmentality as it exists in a way as a form of ungovernability. Returning to Foucault’s notion of resistance:

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More often one is dealing with the mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds. Just as the network of power relations ends by forming a dense web that passes through apparatuses and institutions, without being exactly localized in them, so too the swarm of points of resistance traverses social stratifications and individual unities. Wolin and Mouffe’s conceptualizations of democracy therefore seem to be forms of resistance within a liberal state whose concern seems more in line with a wholesale depoliticization of modern life.

It becomes possible here to understand the Do-it-Yourself punk scene as one site of an ethics of democratic resistance. Deploying the understanding of positive ethics from Aristotle and Foucault that situates ethics not as a set of abstract guidelines but as the sum total of practices in one’s life that shape the sort of person they desire to be, citizenship becomes the set of activities and practices one takes part in. In a liberal democracy, the creation and inhabiting of the political stands as a sort of resistance to a movement away from the political. The open negotiation of contestation and identity which takes place within punk, whether at the scale of the subculture as a whole or at a

\[\text{254 Ibid., 96.}\]
local show, is an act of resistance to a dominant order that seeks order and control over conflict and ungovernability. The ethics of democratic resistance within punk serve as what Kathleen Hanna referred to as the “little lego models” of a different way of living, in this case as a different way of experiencing politics. The remainder of this chapter will look at some of the ways in which this occurs within the punk scene and the roles of boundaries in facilitating this sort of resistance.

Music and the Political: Mattern’s *Acting in Concert*

Mark Mattern offers a promising, though somewhat problematic, description of the role music plays in both the building and maintaining of communities and political movements. He offers a conceptualization of music broader than that traditionally given by cultural theorists:

> The politics of popular music are not limited to the text.
> Popular music operates within a social context that also includes the people and sites directly and indirectly involved with its production, consumption, and use. In other words, the political work of a piece of music also occurs in the multiple ways that people use it and in the ways that it circulates in a context.\(^{255}\)

This conceptualization is a step in the right direction, but in failing to describe the nature of texts in contemporary cultural politics, it is unclear whether he is offering a

substantively different way of analyzing practices or simply expanding the potential number of texts to be analyzed.

Mattern goes on to explain the role of boundaries in popular music, that music serves to simultaneously create and sustain commonalities and differences both within and without a given community.\textsuperscript{256} It serves to define a community both positively and negatively, making clear identities by delineating the specifics of a given ‘us/them’ binary. However, and this is a point that Mattern does not explicitly address; this action has the potential to cut across individuals within the community. In the punk scene, the use of style, lyrics, practices, etc. serve to make clear the limits of community, creating a space of commonality for those within the subculture by clearly defining those outside it. But the violent, overly masculine content of the music and scene serve at the same time to alienate or exclude women from feeling fully part of the scene, as evidenced in “Riot Grrrl is…”.

Mattern continues to describe three forms of “community-based political action through music,”\textsuperscript{257} confrontational, deliberative, and pragmatic. He states, “A confrontational form of acting in concert occurs when members of one community use musical practices to resist or oppose another community. Music helps assert the claims of the community, which are believed to stand in direct opposition to the claims of others.”\textsuperscript{258} Arguing that this is often the way in which the politics of popular music is conceptualized, he critiques the overuse of this approach for assuming too coherent a

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{258} Ibid.
group identity that can potentially serve to silence voices of difference or dissent within a given community.\textsuperscript{259} At the same time, it neglects that subjects might belong to several different communities at once.

The second form of the politics of music focuses on the ways in which it can serve to reach agreement within a community or between two or more communities, “The deliberative form of acting in concert occurs when members of a community use musical practices to debate their identity and commitments or when members of different communities negotiate mutual relations.”\textsuperscript{260} Whereas confrontational forms of acting in concert assume a community that has already been created, deliberative forms of action occur from the very beginning of a community, from the moment of initial definition to ongoing and emergent conflicts within the group regarding various issues.

The final form of political action Mattern calls pragmatic, “when members of one or more communities use music to promote awareness of shared interests and to organize collaborative efforts to address them.”\textsuperscript{261} Whereas the confrontational and deliberative forms begin with divergent interests, the pragmatic relies on the recognition of shared interests, “Pragmatic problem solving means that people share a common stake in solving a problem, that they identify that common stake, and that they discover or create the common bases for acting upon it.”\textsuperscript{262}

\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 26-27.
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{262} Ibid.
Mattern acknowledges that these three forms do not necessarily entail three discrete forms of action and that there will likely be overlap.\textsuperscript{263} If one looks at the punk scene, there exist elements of all three forms of political action. It projects outside the subculture, and often within it, confrontation with mainstream society, capitalism, etc. Yet at the same time it is a negotiation of boundaries and meanings within itself (which at time look more confrontational than deliberative) and a call for common action within the subculture.

Despite Matten’s earlier contention that music comprises a number of different practices beyond the textual content of the music, these practices are hard to find within his forms of political action, which seem contingent upon communication and stable speakers and listeners. It has been my contention throughout this paper that the politics of punk are to be found not only in the music, but in the practices of creating and living within a subculture, that we are constantly remaking both ourselves and our politics. Often times, I would argue, there is a great deal of disconnection between the political content of music and the practices that go into its production and reception. For example, protest music is often distributed by the very multinational corporations an artist is railing against, which to me and others in the Do-It-Yourself punk scene would seem contradictory.

Mattern wants to claim that subjects and communities (which seem to be simply aggregations of subjects) speak from a position outside of power. Mattern’s conceptualization of power is contingent upon subjects having the ability to stand outside

\textsuperscript{263} Ibid., 31.
it and wield it, though it is something tangible that can be possessed and deployed.\textsuperscript{264}

Without this, Mattern’s forms of actions would be harder to disentangle. If subjects exist prior to power relations, they can come to rational consensus and speak it to others, who can then understand it clearly. However, if power is not only an ability to control or influence, but the very ground upon which subjects are generated, it becomes far more difficult to make clear the communicative content of a given musical utterance.

Criticisms aside, Mattern’s conceptualization of the role of music in politics, and vice versa, is a good start towards an understanding of the connection of popular culture and the political that takes seriously not only texts but practices as well. By highlighting the crucial role of spaces in facilitating the emergence of the political, we move closer to understanding how subcultures can function as sites of democratic ethics. In addition, the role of boundaries and boundary making highlight the complicated tensions between commonality and difference that at once energize and problematize democratic life.

Democratic Practices and Subcultural Life

How does one take democracy seriously outside of institutions? In a social context informed by liberalism, freedom and choice have far more pull than community, responsibility, or contestation. Punk, a resistant subculture in that it exists within existing power relations, carries with it this tension even as it attempts to commit itself to democratic practices. It should be noted here that I am taking care not to refer to punk, or any other subculture as democratic, but merely as the site of democratic practices. One of the strengths of the scene (and a source of frustration as well) is the lack of institutions.

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., 33-36.
There’s no one way to put on a show, to write a zine, or to deal with conflict within the scene, which makes it problematic to apply deliberative democratic principles to subculture, as they often focus on the ways in which consensus can be found within a relatively stable, rules-based public sphere.

In “Whos Emma and the Limits of Cultural Studies,” Alan O’Connor describes his experiences starting up a punk space in Toronto. In the beginning, discussions about what that space would be went nowhere:

Meetings to plan the new project started in 1995 and it soon became clear that people had very different projects in mind. Hardcore kids were looking for a place to put on all-ages shows because there was no adequate venue in Toronto. Others saw that as too limiting and wanted a performance space for different types of music, including hip-hop. One person was interested in selling used goods as a way of funding an informal performance space and art centre. One person had experience of an anarchist infoshop in Holland and had that in mind. Some women wanted a feminist space, perhaps for women only.265

Sometimes afterwards, O’Connor decided to rent a storefront prior to further discussions about the purpose of the space; the limits of the actual space could then serve to in some

way set limits to what was possible to accomplish.\textsuperscript{266} From then on, the collective was run on consensus-based decision-making, though not without incident.\textsuperscript{267} O’Connor describes one such issue:

Punk is a very boy-dominated and heterosexual scene. I realized from the start that we would have to take steps to try and make Whos Emma a woman positive space…For me, this wasn’t a matter for discussion. After all, the place was named for Emma Goldman. The response from male participants varied. Some were in support, others didn’t see the need. I was willing to talk to people about this but not willing to sit through a collective meeting in which basic feminist positions had to be defended.

Having initiated and participated in projects similar to this within the scene, my heart goes out to O’Connor. It’s exceedingly difficult at times to balance a desire for democratic decision making and at the same time get anything done, especially in a scene where there are so many different identities and sets of politics. This is in part why I’m hesitant to follow Mattern’s lead and refer to punk as a community; oftentimes punk doesn’t feel so much like a community as it does a collection of disparate individuals with only the most tenuous connections. It seems more accurate to call it a scene, which carries with it less normative content than community. O’Connor’s discussion of the Whos Emma space highlight a tension for the need democratic politics and the need for

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., 695-696.
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid., 698.
political efficacy. If that space hadn’t come to be through relatively undemocratic means, there would not have been the democratic processes engaged in later.

In “Using Power/Fighting Power: The Polity,” Jane Mansbridge highlights the tension between deliberation and the use of coercion:

At some point and on some issues, however, deliberation will not lead to agreement. Good deliberation will have opened areas of agreement and will have clarified the remaining areas of conflict. The participants will have come to understand their interests, including their conflicting interests, better than before deliberation. But material interests, and interests in one’s deepest values, cannot always be reconciled with the interests, material and ideal, of others. At this point, when conflict remains after good deliberation, a democracy has two choices-to remain at the status quo or to act, by coercing some to go along with others.268

Coercion is a problematic term to apply to what O’Connor engaged in, especially since it seemed to him the only way to facilitate further democratic practices, but Mansbridge here is speaking of community or state-wide decision making that has impact upon ones material conditions. But it does make clear the tension that exists often between democratic practices and actual results.

Mansbridge concludes on the note that this tension is in fact productive:

The tensions we should keep alive in democratic practice resemble the tensions we should keep alive within ourselves when we try to use the power that has made us who we are and yet fight that power at the same time…When we compromise with justice, we must design our lives and our institutions so that the justice that is compromised remains nagging, in the margin somewhere, in a bracket that does not go away, to pique our should and goad us into further action.²⁶⁹

In our daily lives, inside or outside subculture, we are often forced to compromise our principles so that we might go on to apply those principles elsewhere. The anti-corporate, anti-capitalist punk sometimes has to work for a corporation to make ends meet; the punk committed to consensus must sometimes act undemocratically to facilitate a space or an action that will both benefit their community and facilitate further democratic action.

The scene as a space is many things at once; it is home and at the same time foreign, it is political and at the same time free from politics, it is commonality and at the same time a site of difference. Different subjects experience the scene differently; what is welcoming and warm to one can seem distant and cold to another. More often, this has to do with who is recognized as a member. If we return to “Riot Grrrl is…” for a

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 59.
moment, it becomes clear that at least in part it is a demand to be let in, a demand for legitimacy in the eyes of others.

Punk relies on boundaries to construct real and discursive spaces where one can inhabit the world safely, where one can construct something resembling home. There is a desire to construct, if only momentarily, a place of commonality, consensus, and safety. This was part of the appeal of punk for me; I spent the majority of my time feeling embattled, oftentimes subject to violence. Punk was a space I could feel secure in, despite what may seem to outsiders to be a radically insecure place.

Unfortunately, the desire to construct a sense of home is predicated on boundary making, exclusion, and a denial of political contestation. Shows in the early to mid 90’s were a constant site of conflict over whether or not punk should be political, whether or not women, for example, had a right to contest their exclusion. Bonnie Honig, in “Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home,” argues that to allow difference to work itself out, “Is to give up on the cream of a place called home, a place free of power, conflict, and struggle, a place-an identity, a form of life, a group vision-unmarked or unriven by difference and untouched by the power brought to bear upon it by the identities that strive to ground themselves in its place.” Honig continues, speaking of the tendency of home to obfuscate and deny difference:

The dream of home is dangerous, particularly in postcolonial settings, because it animates and exacerbates the inability of constituted subjects—or nations—to accept their own internal differences and divisions, and it engenders zealotry, the fill to bring the dream of unitariness or home into being. It leads the subject to project its internal differences onto external Others and then to rage against them for standing in the way of its dream.271

This move occurs on the smallest of scales; often the punk scene displaces internal differences onto the demands of others for inclusion. There is always division in the scene, there are far too many different ideas of what it should be, and despite the relative homogeneity regarding the backgrounds of punks, a great deal of conflict imported into the scene from outside. Yet when confronted by the Other, the scene instantly transforms into an idyllic, conflict-free zone invaded by external forces. The rub is that in order for the punk scene to stay relevant to many within it is to remain a safe place, but in order to live up to the politics it often espouses, must at the same time be open to the unsafe.

By their very nature, resistant subcultures exist in a world they have little say in creating. Additionally, they often have few institutions in which to learn to live in a democratic manner. This is in part why I am hesitating to cite punk as a space of democracy, preferring the humbler site of democratic practices. We, at our best, act democratically, but not all the time, in fact, not often at all. With this in mind, I will

271 Ibid., 270.
spend the remainder of this chapter speaking of some of the democratic practices that take place within the punk scene.

Boundaries need not be physical; there are limits to the type of speech one may use within democratic deliberations. Much of the critique of punk leveled by Riot Grrrls revolved around the fact that the aggressive, masculine performance of punk often silenced women:

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged, in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of begetgutboyrock that tells us we can’t play our instruments, in the face of The Man who says our bands and zines are “the worst” things he’s seen and claims the only reason we even exist is to profit from girlzine bandwagon hype…

BECAUSE we don’t wanna assimilate to someone else’s (Boy) standards of what is or isn’t “good” music or punk rock or “good” writing AND THUS need to create forums where we can recreate, destroy and define our own visions.272

Riot Grrrl identification became in a way a democratic practice; it meant going to shows, making one’s self visible, making music or booking shows or writing a zine with the

272 Riot Grrrl, “Riot Grrrl is…” 179.
intention of expanding understandings of what is acceptable communication within the scene.

Iris Marion Young describes the exclusionary implications of delineating acceptable forms of speech in “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,” when she claims:

Deliberative theorists tend to assume that bracketing political and economic power is sufficient to make speakers equal. This assumption fails to notice that the social power that can prevent people from being equal speakers derives not only from economic dependence or political domination but also from an internalized sense of the right one has to speak or not to speak, and from the devaluation of some people’s style of speech and the elevation of others.²⁷³

Bands comprised of women or zines written by women are often seen as somehow less legitimate than those of men within the punk scene; Riot Grrrls set out to either force punks to listen to them, or to create their own scene. This often involved actions like confronting hecklers or putting one’s body in the middle of the mosh pit to create space for women at the front of the show.

Young wrote this not as a set of prescriptions or strategies, but as a model of communicative democracy more inclusive than deliberative conceptions of democracy

²⁷³ Young, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,” 122.
that included a broader understanding of acceptable forms of speech. She is right that forms of speech are often gendered and that some have more opportunity to practice the correct forms of speech, often along the lines of race, class, and gender. Unfortunately, in positing this argument in the context of an academic debate upon theoretical models of democracy, she missed the vitality and plurality of practices undertaken to actually expand acceptable forms of speech within lived politics. It would seem to me that rather than asking, “Which forms of speech should be included in a more inclusive politics?” it might have been more helpful to ask, “How do we expand the forms of acceptable speech in an already existing political landscape?”

Young makes a tacit assumption that forms of speech are arrived at through practice, that the rational, disinterested speech deliberative democrats privilege is something learned while immersed in power relations that serve to facilitate their learning by some and discourage others, rather than being a capacity universally held by all subjects. Speaking is not simply the communication of an idea from one person to another, but a set of skills learned and evaluations made that are socially situated. Therefore, the act of speaking itself is a politicized activity, one that gets one closer to or further from acceptable manners of interacting within the political. I would argue that if speaking is a learned activity within a set of power relations, than listening is as well.

In a modernist framework, the emphasis is often put on the means by which one verbalizes the universal, or rationally argues with others to generate the universal through

274 Ibid., 1332-133.
speech. In *Strong Democracy*, Benjamin Barber emphasizes the role of listening in democratic life:

The participatory process of self-legislation that characterizes strong democracy attempts to balance adversary politics by nourishing the mutualistic art of listening. “I will listen” means to the strong democrat not that I will scan my adversary’s position for weaknesses and potential trade-offs, nor even that I will tolerantly permit him to say whatever he chooses. It means, rather, “I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good.”

He describes listening as, “a mutualistic art that by its very practice enhances equality.” Speech is a potentially a politically activity, the willingness and ability to listen are equally political. Listening is not just the accepting of the speech of another, but a means by which those engaged in contestation show regard for one another. Conversely, the refusal to listen is often a sign of disregard for the presence of another.

Susan Bickford likewise emphasizes the role of listening, “both speaking and listening are central activities of citizenship.” Bickford finds Barber’s conception of

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275 Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 175.
276 Ibid.
listening troubling, when connected to his larger political project, since it can serve to try to eliminate sites of contention or difference that might not be possible by the move to ‘put one’s self in another’s shoes’, if such a thing is possible or even desirable. She instead offers a notion of the political based on listening in an attempt:

To theorize democratic communicative interaction that depends not on the possibility of consensus but on the presence of listening. Such listening does not require the purification of motives or abstracting from our identity, nor does it involve empathy for one another or a strong sense of community. It is a constitutive element in the process of figuring out, in the face of conflict, what to do.278

Rather than listen away conflict by symbolically eliminating difference, Bickford proposes that listening accommodate difference without removing it. This conceptualization also emphasizes the need for spaces that can serve as venues of speaking and listening, though it is unclear what those spaces would look like.

It would probably not look like a punk show. However, if listening, like speech, is a practice learned, then the punk scene could be one possible site of democratic listening. When Riot Grrrl was at its zenith, it was not uncommon for women to attempt to create a dialogue regarding behavior at the show. Mixing the need for direct action in order to facilitate democratic practices with those practices themselves, the show itself became a venue for democratic practices.

278 Ibid., 19.
The need for direct action in order to facilitate democratic practices seems to be contradictory. Can undemocratic acts lead to democratic ends? How does one justify the use of force or coercion, even if it is to destabilize momentarily power relations that serve to exclude? Is democracy too important to entrust to democratic processes? These are questions that I will elide, at least in part, by locating political meaning in the practices themselves, rather than the motivations of the subjects undertaking them. As I have mentioned before, I am conceptualizing punk as democratic, but not as a democracy, as a site where skills can be learned and developed, not as an institution capable of generating democratically justified decisions.

While it is quite difficult to formulate an understanding of punk politics that can adequately and coherently address the myriad set of interests and differences found within the scene, it is possible to conceptualize the punk scene as a site for the development of an ethics of democratic resistance. Punk might not often look or behave like a democracy, but it can serve as a space in which subjects might practice the democratic activities that make them citizens. In a late capitalist liberal state, these activities undertaken by the wrong crowd could be considered a form of resistance to a largely depoliticizing culture. I have mentioned just a few of these practices, there are certainly more.

I have also noted several tensions within democratic politics that find themselves manifest in D.I.Y. punk. The first is the tension between difference and commonality, which at once makes the political possible, yet fraught with difficulties. The second is between the desire for democratic practices and the need for political efficacy. Often the
democratic in the scene is predicated upon the undemocratic. The third is the tension
between speaking and listening, between who is granted standing and how one listens.
However, I find that instead of hampering democratic practices, these tensions in fact
encourage them.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

It is my hope that in the course of this project that I have outlined one possible way of doing cultural studies that, while not denigrating or displacing the role of language or discourse as a structuring agent, reintroduces materialism into our understandings of the connections, however tenuous, between culture and the political. In the Theses on Feuerbach, Marx located as central the practices that make up our lives and effect the ways in which we interpret the world:

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the active side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism—but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity. Hence, in Das Wesen des Christentums, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only
genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical manifestation.\textsuperscript{279}

It is my contention that cultural studies, and in particular studies of punk from this approach, systematically ignore the role that day to day material practices play in informing and at times dictating the connections between a given cultural form and its attendant politics. In focusing on the construction of the image almost exclusively as a counter-hegemonic marker, cultural studies has itself constructed a theoretical blind spot regarding the ways in which texts and practices often contradict one another.

When these theorists do talk about practices, they do so by transforming the practice to a text, which serves to theorize what is being communicated, consciously or unconsciously, but pays paltry attention to what is actually being done. Ironically, this may have something to do with Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony, or more particularly his understandings of counter-hegemonic activities. He describes these as wars of position\textsuperscript{280}, which seems to me to be an especially unfortunate metaphor. By juxtaposing the counter-hegemonic agent in a dialectical relationship with hegemony itself, he posits a subject who no longer exists within the material world, but who by power of consciousness can see through the obfuscations of capital to the truth of things. Therefore the resistant figure stands outside of power relations, or more apropos, ideological apparatuses.

It is unclear to me how this is possible. If we are ourselves constructed in no small part by the practices we take part in, which is to say that practices themselves play

\textsuperscript{279} Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” 143.
a significant role in constituting political subjects, then it would be improbable that one
could then rise above the practices from which they emerge. Within a Marxist project,
this would be problematic, as it is at least in some way contingent upon the ability of the
revolutionary subject to see the truth of capital. The outline I have propose does put
limits on the sorts of normative claims that one can make from within existing structures
and relationships of power.

My hope is not to substitute another way of making normative claims, but to add
in some small way to the descriptive power of looking at culture as a site of the political,
to open a few new areas of possible analysis. The ways of looking at culture that I have
propose in fact make it more difficult to make positive claims regarding the political
purchase of resistant subcultures; it is been my intention to make them more accurate by
paying closer attention to a materialism of social practices.

In Chapter 2 I attempted to weave together three narratives present both in
cultural studies and punk studies. The first was the Marxist critique of ideology, as it
moves from Marx to Gramsci to the Frankfurt School theorists to Althusser, which posits
that it is the interests of capital that dictate cultural outputs. This moved through
conceptions of ideology to hegemony, from the culture industry to Ideological State
Apparatuses, each of which served in its own way to obfuscate objective reality to those
most affected by it. Viewed from this framework, punk could be seen as anything from a
resistance to hegemony to an acquiescence to capitalist modes of production; each
approach could very well critique the commodity fetishism of punk.
The second narrative is that of cultural studies, which emerged as an attempt to synthesize a vaguely (and sometimes not-so-vaguely) Marxist politics with semiotics. Cultural studies became a project interested in cultural signs, and the ways in which those signs supported or resisted the dominant order. It is here that culture is interpreted primarily by its communicative function; culture is not subject-constituting, but a means by which of explicitly or covertly communicating ideas. Starting with Dick Hebdige’s work on punk as subcultural style, this approach dominates punk studies. Studies of punk have with few exceptions concentrated upon the style of punk dress, writing, music, performance, etc. and the ways in which it functions to resist capitalism. Unfortunately, cultural studies’ emphasis on the communicative aspects of culture and subculture has led to a neglect of the ways in which cultural practices inform cultural utterances. Anti-capitalist lyrics from a punk band might provide a clue as to their politics, but so would looking at the ways in which they navigate a capitalist landscape. Are they on a major label? What sorts of shows do they play? Are they D.I.Y.? These seem to me questions worth considering.

The third narrative is that of the sociological approach to punk as a subculture. Moving the focus away from the text to the ways in which subcultural institutions and practices play a significant role in the lives of punk as well as the politics that emerge from those lives, this approach adds a much needed layer of complexity to analyses of culture that focus solely on the text. Particularly promising are a number of studies of punk utilizing Bourdieu’s conception of fields of cultural production, which opens up analysis of multiple sites of subcultural life previously ignored by cultural studies, from
the means by which cultural artifacts are produced to the conditions of cultural consumption.

While I must admit to having a greater affinity for the last approach to the study of culture, since it is most in line with my project, this is not to say that I would be rid of the other two. Both offer a great deal to a critical analysis of culture in a capitalist context. The emphasis on production in Marxist critiques of pop culture and the semiotic analysis of the value laden nature of the cultural text are worth retaining; however, neither should stand as an authoritative voice regarding the particular political content of a given cultural form, as both neglect what seem to me to be integral parts of cultural and subcultural politics, which I try to identify in the following chapters.

In Chapter 3 I sought to adapt Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of ethical behavior, which was based on Aristotle’s positive ethics, to subcultural life. If one posits that subjects are created within the material world, rather than existing prior to it, then the practices one engages in serve at least in part to constitute that subjectivity. This moves us away slightly from the emphasis on the text to a grounding in cultural practices. Punk serves as just one site where cultural practices are engaged with and enacted, the particular style or purpose or intention of those actions play a role in constructing the individual subject. D.I.Y. punk presents one such set of activities one can engage in that may affect the formation of politicized subjects. Simply put, we do not just speak punk or look punk, but in a way, we do punk.

Chapter 4 focused on the ways in which subculture requires and creates spaces, real and metaphorical, permanent and temporary, within which practices can take place.
In a time where it seems like both real public spaces and real senses or experiences of place seem to be evaporating, part of the role punk plays as a resistant subculture is to facilitate and motivate the creation of punk places. These punk places functions as shelters from dominant discourses and practices where participants may engage in activities that model new and different ways of living.

The previous two chapters attempted to theorize the role punk plays in generating political subjects and the role of spaces and places those subjects inhabit; Chapter 4 is an exploration of the ways in which those subjects interact within the spaces they create. Punk is certainly not a democracy, but there are many practices within the scene which could be credibly described as democratic. Synthesizing Sheldon Wolin and Chantal Mouffe’s conceptions of democracy and the political with Foucault’s notion of technologies of the self, I argue that punk functions of the site of a creation of a ethic of democratic resistance.

The nature of subcultures precludes democratic institutions, which must last over time, but often facilitate democratic activities. If we view citizenship not as an a priori condition of political existence but rather as a set of experiences, skills, and practices, it is arguable that subcultures which encourage the participation of its members in the creation not just of single events but the meanings of the subculture itself contribute in meaningful ways to the creation of democratic citizens even in a dominant liberal politics that downplay the role of contestation and the political.

One of the questions I had when I started this project, that I have not yet addressed, is whether or not punk is anti-capitalist. This involves answering several
inter-related questions. First, what is punk? Second, what is it to be anti-capitalist? Third, does the way in which the first is answered affect the answer to the second?

To answer the first question, I have given a definition of punk throughout this project as a heterogenous subculture with a number of different concerns, interests, and potential politics. It might be fair to say that some versions or sub-genres of punk might be anti-capitalist while others might be indifferent to it. This goes to the unity of the subcultural voice. The depiction given within cultural studies, which too often seeks unity where none exists within the scene, is of a culture that speaks with one voice. To return to Marx’s quote above, cultural theory has taken a set of disparate activities and practices and grafted onto them meaning. Punk is removed from material reality and transformed into a signifier, which can then be analyzed. It has been my goal to disrupt this signifier by looking at the material practices of punk as a subculture. Still, Do-It-Yourself punk has announced itself as anti-capitalist; we shall see if this is tenable.

The term anti-capitalist is to me problematic for several reasons. First, it implies that one can be in direct opposition to capitalism; that one can remove his or her self from the ways in which their subjectivity has been constructed within the practices and discourses of capitalism in order to stand outside it. Second, the term itself is unclear. Is it that punks just don’t care for capitalism? Is it simply a position related to an issue, or a state of being comprised by practices informing critique? Third, the question leads to a specific type of answer. It reduces both punk and anti-capitalism to single entities.

The only way to answer that question is to reduce a diverse subculture into a single set of politics and identities and at the same time to reduce a resistance to
capitalism to a single act of taking a position on a given state of affairs. If one expands the definition of either, it becomes a much more difficult question to answer. Which I think is the rub of materialism; unlike the idealism practiced often in cultural theory, a more materialist understanding of culture makes it infinitely harder to answer such a question.

To rephrase the question, it might be better to ask whether or not tools or practices exist within punk subculture that could facilitate a resistance to capitalism. This approach emphasizes the role practices play in crafting subjects with both the inclination and ability to resist capital. By constructing the intention or consequence as resistance to capitalism rather than anti-capitalism, the at times contradictory nature of practices is allowed to coexist with a given set of politics. One of the ironies of D.I.Y. punk is that as much as it resists or sets itself in opposition to capitalism, it remains in some ways entrepreneurial. Read in such a way, even though there is little critique of the commodification of culture (though to be sure there is some) even within the punk scene, it figures as resistant because it involves the learning of skills and practices in order to maintain the scene that make cultural production more available.

D.I.Y. Capitalism: Acquiescence or Resistance?

What exactly is the point of D.I.Y.? Is it a re-imagining of capitalism that dulls critique? Is it resistance? Is it just an attempt to produce cultural products that someone might want? Is it all of these things? There is no consensus regarding the politics of D.I.Y. from either participants or observers. For Tom Frank, underground culture, of
which Do-It-Yourself punk is a part, is a form of resistance to the culture industry and capitalism as a whole:

   Few among us are foolish enough to believe that “the music industry” is just a bigger version of the next-door indie label, just a collection of simple record companies gifted mysteriously with gargantuan budgets and strange powers to silence criticism. We inhabit an entirely different world, intend entirely different outcomes. They seek fresh cultural fuel so that the machinery of stupidity may run incessantly; we cry out from under that machine’s wheels. They manufacture lifestyle, we live lives.281

Alan O’Connor, speaking specifically about D.I.Y. record labels, argues that they are “struggles for autonomy,”282 seeking freedom from corporate restraints to produce the sorts of cultural they want.

   More pessimistically, Joel Schalit argues that D.I.Y. is susceptible to co-optation due to a lack of a real critique of capitalism:

   Instead of advocating the overthrow of capitalist relations of production, punk insists on reverting to an early form of capitalist development which emphasizes the necessity of the imagination, skills, and hard work of the entrepreneur

282 O’Connor, Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of DIY.
as opposed to the blindness and stupidity of the corporation and the bureaucrat. In this light punk appears as a critique of mass culture instead of a critique of capitalist culture.\textsuperscript{283}

Stacy Thompson takes a similar tack, but comes to a different conclusion: Punks link their aesthetics to their economics to stake out, locally and temporarily, social and material spaces in which a limited number of people can, for the most part, own their own means of production, which is precisely what DIY entails. In order to do-it-yourself, you must own the means for doing it. Punks have not separated themselves wholly from capitalism…but they do demonstrate that, even in the increasingly global economy of the early twenty-first century, an earlier form of capitalism can flourish—the enterprise instead of the corporation. If abolishing capitalism through punk has so far failed, but as a process and a project committed to transforming consumers into producers, it succeeds on a daily basis.\textsuperscript{284}

Each of these ring true to a certain extent, though are not without problems. Frank, I think, is correct that punk is resisting the culture industry, but his description does not really address how easily punk can be co-opted; the underground, whether it likes it or not, is in a way a capitalist proving ground. I find O’Connor’s notion of D.I.Y.

\textsuperscript{283} Schalit, “Maximum False Consciousness: The Political Economy of American Punk.”
\textsuperscript{284} Thompson, \textit{Punk Productions}, 179.
as a struggle for autonomy appealing, though I think he leaves the term autonomy undertheorized. Autonomy as a concept is problematic if one understands the subject as constituted by power, but there is something there in his juxtaposition between indie major labels.

Schalit makes a good point that punk does not offer a coherent critique of capitalism. However, I am not sure that punk can stand outside of capitalist practices completely; it is resistant, not revolutionary. He seems to ask of punk something I am not sure is possible, both due to its immersion within capitalism and punk’s relatively incoherent nature.

I am most sympathetic to Thompson’s understanding of D.I.Y., since it at once addresses each of the other points I have mentioned, and at the same time emphasizing the role of practices. I disagree with certain elements of his argument, which I have addressed in previous chapters, and would argue that punk practices are less about materializing desires and more about the constitutive nature of those practices. However, I think we come to the same conclusion. D.I.Y. is not a critique of capitalism inasmuch as it is a re-imagining of capitalism that critiques corporate dominance, increases a sense of autonomy, and allows for the development of skills and practices that could facilitate a resistance to capitalism.

I began this project by placing myself in it and trying to express what this scene has meant to me. D.I.Y. punk led me to politics; this is not true of everyone who has participated, but it seems true of enough people I’ve encountered through the scene to warrant this type of project. It strikes me as significant that a contradictory, oft-times
reactionary, and always problematic subculture has inspired so many not just to performance, but to the dirty work as well. Punk hasn’t changed the world, but it has changed the ways in which I live my daily life, it has provided me shelter, and it introduced me to political action. Perhaps this is one purpose of resistance, its success or failure should not be measured by whether or not it changes objective reality, but whether or not it opens up possibilities of new ways of living and novel ways of imagining different worlds.
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