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Know history!: John Lydon, cultural capital and the prog/punk dialectic

SEAN ALBIEZ

Abstract

Johnny Rotten / John Lydon was and remains the first voice of British punk and yet consistently refuses to identify with punk as a subculture. In revisiting his observations on his career with the Sex Pistols and Public Image Ltd (PiL) in the 1976–1980 period, this article considers how 'narratives of self' enable us to gain insights into individual subjectivity and the (trans) formation of identity. Through this material we can investigate the role of Lydon's idiosyncratic cultural capital in his creative process. It is suggested that this investigation requires us to consider ideas of cultural continuity and flow in relation to Lydon, the creative contexts within which he operated and the relationship between progressive music, punk and post-punk in the 1970s.

Introduction

How do we account for a musician's creativity? What credence can we give to musicians' perspectives on their intentions? Are they performing automatons, absolutely determined by pre-existing and historically located musical works and practices? Or are they creatively autonomous, with a nagging muse pushing them ever onwards into virgin musical territory? It seems logical to suggest that to be creative is not to imagine and innovate afresh from an internal genius but to combine and reconfigure existing musical resources into relatively new forms – sometimes in unexpected and innovative ways. With this in mind, this study of John Lydon (Johnny Rotten) of the Sex Pistols and Public Image Ltd (PiL), addresses three key questions. Firstly, how do we approach the narratives that Lydon tells us, and himself, about his historical experiences? Secondly, how did Lydon come upon the personal resources and *cultural capital*[1] (Bourdieu 1973) through which he formulated his music? Thirdly, in what way did Lydon's reconfiguration of personal and cultural resources place him and the audience in a relatively new performative, musical and sonic space? Underpinning these questions is a broader issue – does what Lydon have to tell us require us to reconsider our understanding of the history of late 1970s rock music and the relationship of progressive rock to punk and post-punk? His 'narratives of self' (Hall 1992) – personal oral history found in interviews and his autobiography – form the basis of his and our understanding of his public identity, and it is through these that we can study and understand Lydon's negotiation of the cultural terrain of the late 1970s.

What emerges in this study is that we can begin to challenge assumptions about the historical and dialectical relationship of progressive rock and punk. In

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Lydon, and his colleagues in PiL, we find evidence of musical continuity as much as change in their embrace of music and creative strategies seemingly antithetical to punk. Lydon's idiosyncratic creative resources and cultural capital emerged in part from his early active and eclectic consumption of music, including progressive rock. His post-Pistols career, working with Afrika Bambaataa, Bill Laswell, Ginger Baker, Jah Wobble, Ryuichi Sakamoto and Leftfield, among others, also demonstrates a developing interest in diverse musics. Though class conflict is often central to Lydon's narratives, the perceived prog/punk 'class war' that remains in many punk histories can be challenged. Cultural capital is not fixed and cannot be mapped onto an individual's position in a static model of social class. The class specificity of cultural capital and its relationship to the social distinctions of 1970s rock music – with 'prog' a cerebral middle class pursuit and punk a visceral working-class revolt – can be contested and reconfigured through Lydon.

As Medhurst (1999) has indicated, we should be careful of treating autobiographical material as a path to 'truth'. Yet, equally, we should recognise that such material usually provides our clearest and only access to an individual's perception of their negotiation of a historical context. Lydon's account of his life in and around the punk era offers us a critical perspective on cultural capital, its relationship to creativity and the importance of 'narratives of self' (or oral history) in informing our understanding of personal and popular music history.

Know history!: progressive rock and punk

> Punk erupted into my life in the autumn of 1977 . . . Swathes of my existing record collection had to be disavowed, [but] . . . it was OK to have three Van Der Graaf Generator albums because Johnny Rotten said he liked their singer, Peter Hammill. (Medhurst 1999, p. 221)

John Lydon's musical interests always travelled beyond the confines of punk, and punk itself was not a clear-cut epochal break with the past. The problem with considering punk as a cultural or personal 'year zero' is that we are rail-roaded into characterising all that came before as the anti-thesis of punk. In television documentaries on punk history, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Pink Floyd, Rick Wakeman and Yes are lazily trotted out as prime examples of progressive music's middle-class betrayal of primal 'working-class' rock and roll (often using exactly the same film and video clips – see *Dancing in the Street*, 1996, *God Save the Queen*, 2002 and *The Punk Years*, 2002). However, Hawkwind's space rock bridged progressive and psychedelic punk, and Pink Floyd's late-60s 'Reaction in G' was a single chord drone played *at* heckling audiences in an early defiant punk-like gesture. Therefore, the characterisation of progressive rock in punk histories as over-elaborate, neo-Romantic, middle-class, pastoralism is far too simplistic. Furthermore, the later brutal proto-grunge guitar noise of King Crimson's Robert Fripp on *Red* (1974) (a Kurt Cobain favourite), and Brian Eno's proto-punk 'assaultive rock' (e.g. 'Third Uncle', *Taking Tiger Mountain (By Strategy)*, 'King's Lead Hat', *Before and After Science*) (Tamm 1995, pp. 111–15) are sonically dislocated from the classical and Romantic pretensions of some progressive rock. Moreover, West German 'home-made' and experimental Krautrock (e.g. Tangerine Dream, Can, Popol Vuh, Cluster, Harmonia, Ash Ra Tempel, Neu!), which had a following in the UK, drew on similar late-60s counter-cultural resources as British progressive rock in creating anti-Romantic kosmiche/cosmic head music; music that was about both the cerebral Apollonian and visceral Dionysian pleasures of rock.

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Progressive rock is a slippery term that attempts to contain a diverse range of music promoting experimentation, individualism, an art aesthetic, and paradoxically, golden age romanticism and futurist hyper-modernism. Weinstein addresses this complexity by suggesting,

> Progressive rock is rather less than a genre and a lot more than one, too . . . its defining feature is not a set of concrete sonic elements, such as particular rhythms or instrumentation. Instead, progressive rock is distinguished by a conceptual trope: the appropriation of non-popular musical forms . . . the sources are 'classical music', jazz and avant-garde music. (Weinstein 2002, p. 91)

The young working-class Lydon discriminated between progressive artists, specifically citing Van Der Graaf Generator and Can as 'influences'. He also enjoyed Miles Davis, John Cale, Roxy Music and nursed a dub reggae obsession. The esteem in which he held Hawkwind is evident in the re-formed Sex Pistols performance of 'Silver Machine' at Crystal Palace in July 2002. There are also (probably) apocryphal tales about Lydon being a roadie for Hawkwind on their mid-70s 'The Space Ritual' tour.

The personal investment in music of the progressive period – and in the middle-class cultural capital it was said to represent – by Lydon, Keith Levene of The Clash and PiL, The Damned (loved Syd Barrett and produced by Nick Mason of Pink Floyd), Wire and David Thomas of Pere Ubu is revealing. Later post-punk work by Siouxsie and the Banshees, in conjunction with Robert Smith of The Cure, traded nostalgically on the late-1960s psychedelic counter-culture, and Julian Cope has made no secret of his diverse pre- and post-punk musical influences. The polarisation of 'prog' and punk promulgated in the 1976–1977 period may have as much to do with internal class and gender politics in the *Melody Maker* offices (Caroline Coon versus . . . the rest?) as a real groundswell of anti-progressive sentiment (Johnstone 1995, pp. 217–18). The Coon analysis of the burgeoning punk scene as a knowing, working-class kick in the face of middle-class, University-educated progressives (a narrative Lydon employs, but implicitly contradicts) seems a defining trope which froze debate on the musical explosion of punk; Laing (1985, p. 121), Clarke (1990) and Muggleton (2000) have all specifically questioned and challenged the rigid class identity of punk (then and since). However, Coon's iconoclastic narrative predetermined the future discourses of punk history, and is frequently reproduced in popular television histories of rock and punk.

Attitudes of middle-class progressive musicians to punk are equally revealing in probing the prog/punk dialectic. Van Der Graaf Generator's Peter Hammill embraced punk due to the similarity of its anti-establishment ethos to that of the late-60s counter-culture. Hammill presaged punk with his 1975 album *Nadir's Big Chance*, nostalgically exploring the sonic power and simplicity of three-chord 1960s garage punk. He questioned the performative decadence of progressive and art rock in the title track, 'Nadir's Big Chance', calling for the destruction of inauthentic rock music and the music industry, assisted by an assaultive rock noise. Lydon rated Hammill and stated, 'Oh Peter Hammill's great . . . a true original . . . I just liked him for years . . . if you listen to his solo albums I'm damn sure Bowie copied a lot out of that geezer'.[2] Hammill and Lydon share a disdain for organised religion and hypocrisy (a reaction to their Catholicism?), and vocal styles, textures and strategies that are often similar in all but accent. Peter Hammill recently said of *Nadir's Big Chance* and Lydon's praise:

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it was, supposedly, an influential record . . . Though I still don't know exactly how influences work. Some musical things, perhaps, can be traced; but I'd prefer to think that my approach of get on with what you have to do rather than what people tell you to do would be what was passed on. And naturally I fully endorsed the smash the system with the song ethos of punk. Shame the music biz swallowed it all so quickly and easily . . .[3]

Ex-Genesis singer Peter Gabriel, a friend and collaborator of Hammill's, attended early Pistols' gigs and viewed punk as a necessary development, saying 'I didn't go for the music much, but I enjoyed Rotten. I was interested at that point because other people who I was with hated them with a venom I hadn't seen for a long time . . . anyone who can produce that kind of reaction must be interesting' (Bright 2000, p. 112). Gabriel incorporated and explored punk in his post-punk studio albums, with The Jam's Paul Weller and Hammill lending a hand. The appeal of punk for Gabriel was in its attitude, anger, apparent authenticity and ability to provoke which he found increasingly lacking in British progressive music – but did punk bury progressive rock in Britain?

Typical of the claims that punk extinguished 'dinosaur rock' is the following: 'way back when dinosaurs (Emerson, Lake and Palmer, Genesis *et al*.) ruled the earth, it was the Pistols who drove them to extinction' (Morat 2000). In fact, punk could not commercially compete with Pink Floyd, Genesis or Yes, pop/rock artists ELO, Abba and David Soul, and disco in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Laing 1985, pp. 32–5). The Pistols were extinct well before Pink Floyd (though have risen twice from the grave!). The progressive dinosaurs remained, on the whole, undefeated and arguably reinvigorated by punk, with Pink Floyd's *Animals* (1977) and *The Wall* (1979) accurately characterising the post-punk Lydon mindset. Yes, Genesis and Phil Collins in one way or another found their greatest commercial success in the 1980s. Therefore, the long-term impact of punk in Britain is arguably over-amplified due to the academic celebration of spectacular 'oppositional' working-class subcultures (Hebdige 1979, and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies) and popular memories of media-fuelled moral panics. Ironically, in the post-punk era, Lydon and PiL pursued a distinctly progressive path in an attempt to bury punk.

Lydon and the 'narrative of self'

With this revised history in mind, we should consider how Lydon negotiated this period as a member of the Sex Pistols and PiL. We should not view him as an individual creative genius with a fixed core self, but as a cultural agent continually re-configuring and performing his identity through a process of self-transformation. *Subjectivity* and *identity* have come under much scrutiny in postmodern theory, with debates becoming increasingly arcane. Hall (1992) and Couldry (2000) are useful in mapping the issues, with Hall's relativistic and *contingent* model countered by Couldry's arguments for a *consistent* model of identity and subjectivity. Although identity and subjectivity are theoretically up for grabs, the historical Lydon is remarkably consistent in tone and perspective – if theory questions Lydon's agency and self-invention, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. Difficulties in mapping identity and subjectivity do not preclude studying the historical Lydon, his creative process and his negotiation of the punk era. However, we need to acknowledge the problems and theoretical challenges of analysing Lydon's oral history.

In thinking about *identity*, Hall (1992) describes the rise of the 'post-modern subject', and how the 'de-centred' individual of postmodernism constructs a 'cen-

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tred' identity that feels constant, tangible and real. This is the strategy through which the individual makes sense of the world around them and their relationship to it. Hall suggests,

> Within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continually being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of the self' about ourselves. The fully unified completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy . . . (Hall 1992, p. 277)

At an individual level, Lydon's ongoing and developing *narrative of self* is documented in press and television interviews, his autobiography and musical activities. But to Hall, this narrative obfuscates the complexity of Lydon's *identities*. In analysing this narrative we should recognise that it is a '(dis)comforting story' that is coming to terms with a complex and shifting identity. At the cultural level, punk as a phenomenon was the outcome of musicians and consumers negotiating and commentating on the punk era through their own narration of commonly held, but differently experienced, stories. Individual musicians and consumers both 'construct a comforting story' about their cultural experiences in attempting to create a stable and unified identity, and this narrative of self is founded on the individualist myth central to Western culture. Hall suggests that the fully realised sense of self is only a momentary, *contingent* settlement.

Our *subjectivity* is constituted to an extent by the structures of the cultural and social relations we live within. However, we are relatively autonomous in the way that we negotiate these structures. We can make claims that our formation of identity is the product of an *active* and *self-reflexive* process throughout our lives. Couldry suggests 'the self is understood as an *open ended* [my emphasis] practice of *narration* . . . which, if it succeeds as a narrative can integrate contradictions into a complex and distinctive perspective on the world' (Couldry 2000, p. 119). Couldry counters Hall by arguing that the individual is an active negotiator of experience who constructs a *distinct* settlement of identity rather than a *contingent* and *fleeting* one. The narrative of self is a subjectivity that constitutes the individual and has consistency and integrity. The narrative may contain elements of what Hall calls 'fantasy', but it is the foundation upon which the individual negotiates life experience. Thus we can characterise the histories of those who lived through punk as distinctive and individual experiences that represent narrative continuity. This sense of subjectivity as *continuous narrative flow*, rather than *discontinuous narrative rupture* is important. Though an individual's memories and experiences of punk are fragmentary, the individual creates a coherent narrative that is re-formed in a developmental process, but remains relatively consistent over time. Couldry suggests 'At every level . . . we need to think about cultural experience and cultural effects as processes, not 'things', as necessarily complex, not simple' (Couldry 2000, p. 128), but these processes can be *subjected to* a distinct subjectivity.

Therefore, punk can be studied usefully through examining the narrative trajectories of musicians and fans. However, though punk's impact may prove to have been profound for the individual, its significance may become contradictory and indistinct if we try to extrapolate from personal oral (hi)stories onto the wider cultural stage. Punk may have perceptibly changed lives, but it is difficult to say how or if it 'changed the world'.

In studying Lydon it is important to acknowledge this problem of extrapola-

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ting from the individual to the cultural. However, in making sense of the trajectory of his *narrative of self* we can learn more about how musicians are historically and culturally located, and how the creative process (in terms of music and identity formation) develops. There are important issues that need to be addressed about the sources, processes and phenomenological aspects of Lydon's subjectivity, but we must assert the validity of approaching him through his perspectives on the 1976–1980 period. He has continually explored *self-identity* and individualism, the complexity of his *cultural and social identities* and his subjective, creative and political intentions within the fields of popular culture and music. He has acknowledged the complexity of his cultural persona, particularly in addressing how he became alienated from the 'role of Rotten' and reverted to John Lydon in PiL.

In the punk period, Lydon's identity had been a site of conflict. It had been appropriated, fought over, and, he felt, misinterpreted by Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols, the media, the judiciary, the British public, Pistols fans and other punk musicians. In PiL's first single 'Public Image' (1978), he reclaimed his identity, explaining how his image had been misrecognised by the public. He suggested the punk audience only understood him as an enthralling spectacle and imitated him by adopting elements of his personal style, without 'getting' the depth of his individualist message. The punk audience's fantasies created a figurehead for a movement that he despised and wanted to leave behind and disrupt. Lydon asserted that it is he, and not the audience, who had created 'Johnny Rotten' (a performance of a role created in the mould of Ziggy Stardust). He says his 'punk' identity had transformed and moved on, and that in bidding farewell to the 'punk Rotten' he refuted the audiences, or anyone else's right to claim ownership over him. The complex relationship between performance on a public stage and the performance of identity in everyday life is addressed in 'Public Image', and Lydon demonstrates his realisation of the difficulty in claiming self-invention in the face of the identities and fantasies projected onto him by the British public.[4]

Postmodern theory compels us to consider the death of the centred subject, but we need to welcome the rebirth of the actor. We should address Lydon as a crucial cultural agent in the punk moment and get on with understanding what he can *tell* us about punk. What Lydon has to tell us is that punk was the discursive continuation of debates around the Dionysian and Apollonian drives in culture and popular music, and the contradictory artistic and commercial exigencies of popular culture. These pre-existed and were re-formulated in punk, and Lydon addressed them with his idiosyncratic world-view at a particular historical conjuncture, within a specific (and not to be repeated) set of social and cultural relations. Lydon's subjectivity is partly an effect of history, but an effect located in a unique historical moment that he idiosyncratically traversed and narrated. How can we understand the mechanisms or strategies at play in the relationship between this moment and Lydon as actor, and how can we understand autonomy and creativity in this process?

Creativity and the bank of works

Toynbee (2000) suggests how we can approach creative musical practice in its cultural contexts through deploying Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of *habitus*, *strategy* and *field*. In relation to Lydon, this allows us to question the notion of structural relations alone determining modes of creative expression while acknowledging he is partly

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reliant on these structures in the social production of his music in the Sex Pistols and PiL.

Toynbee reconfigures Bourdieu in arguing that making popular music is not an intuitive act of self-expression, but depends on the continual planning, research and monitoring of the outcome of creative decisions – in this way musicians are active creative agents though their modes of expression are heavily prescribed. A musician's *habitus* (personal dispositions, attitudes and predilections) pre-disposes him/her to a set of approaches to playing, writing and performing – Bourdieu calls these *strategies*. These strategies are deployed on a *field* – a prescribed cultural space of popular music institutions and practices. Musicians are argued to have a 'fuzzy' world-view that encapsulates the competitive struggle for capital (economic and cultural) and a utopian drive – success is measured by capital gains and in the effective promotion of both libertarian individualism and/or social responsibility – a kind of (self) conscious capitalism.

Toynbee augments Bourdieu by saying it is the *space of possibles* that are key to understanding cultural creativity. *Possibles* arise in the relationship between the habitus, the field of musical practice and the likelihood of selection (of musical works, practices and strategies) from this field. This forms the basis of the *radius of creativity* – a figurative space demonstrating the range of the likely creative *possibles* of an individual agent. From the radius the creator constructs an individual *voice* that speaks through musical and spoken languages 'already populated with the social intentions of others', but the creator 'compels [them] to serve [their] own new intentions' (Bakhtin quoted in Toynbee 2000, p. 46). There is room therefore to endorse the assertions of artists claiming aesthetic and creative agency while recognising how these are also determined by historical, social and cultural relations.

This limited notion of creative agency needs further expansion. It is crucial to assert that the individual radius of creativity is not only a given objective space 'out there'. Through negotiation, active selection and discrimination, musicians create a distinct and individual 'in here' experience. Their choices are not necessarily predetermined by class, race, age or gender, or any other social or cultural marker. Their habitus informs idiomatic choices that enable them to accumulate cultural capital and construct a *bank of works* from which they draw creative sustenance. This bank is sometimes tangible (a record collection/artist's recorded works/performances attended) or made so through the creative process (a predilection for certain sonic strategies and techniques). In Lydon's case, his bank of cultural capital embraced progressive rock, jazz, soul and reggae as well as rock and pop, and his creative musical strategies and techniques were grounded in and referenced these musics. Like identity, the bank of works shifts, transforms and develops over time but remains the site or repository of accumulated cultural capital. This bank of works is the basis of what is commonly called 'musical influences', with deposits and withdrawals made over a lifetime.

How these influences operate on a micro-level is difficult to specify. For example, in the history and development of folk and country rock musics, there is a continual self-referential acknowledgement of past influences, from Jimmie Rodgers to Woody Guthrie to Bob Dylan to Bruce Springsteen. In the competitive arena of rock music this is less explicit and it is within certain *sonic continuities* that we can find the bank of works deployed in practice. That is through attitude, tone, perspective and musical texture rather than specific musicological or biographical connections. Lydon was inspired by the rock and roll guitar work of the Sex Pistols'

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Steve Jones, but (with)drew from his idiosyncratic bank of works in negotiating an individual space, and creating an innovative voice, within the band. In this, Lydon did not pay direct homage to any of the artists in this bank, but compelled their *voice* to speak through his in an innovative way.

No Future!: Lydon and the Sex Pistols

It was nothing to do with music . . . The sounds of anger are not melodic. (Lydon in *The Punk Years*, 2002)

As Toynbee suggests, musical innovation is found either in incremental differences made by musicians within distinct generic musical fields or by forging unlikely combinations of possibles between musical paradigms. These possibles are not limited to musical strategies but also performative ones. This perhaps explains the ability of the Sex Pistols and Lydon to 'interrupt' and question the values of the British establishment through music that was semiotically, sonically, and emotionally powerful and unfamiliar – but musically derivative. The innovation of the Sex Pistols music was in the cultural, aural and oral performance in the grooves of their records and the stages they occupied; that is, in the emotional assertion of an individualist identity and the anger of their performance, and not in the chords, rhythms or riffs they played.

The *voice*, in all senses, of Johnny Rotten seemed unique and it was this that was the focus of the emotive and assaultive performances of the Sex Pistols. Extrapolating from the evidence of interviews and the autobiography *Rotten*, it seems Lydon's habitus was informed by an opposition to authority and conformity, partly due to a reaction to a Catholic upbringing, an adolescent lack of faith in fakes, and a distinct sense of despair over the British class and education systems. Lydon never aspired to musicianship, but crucially he loved music – a trait that was actively shared with and supported by his mother – and listened intently to a wide spectrum of left field and mainstream popular music. Among the popular musical *possibles* or cultural capital explicitly acknowledged by Lydon and others in his autobiography or through the Tommy Vance Capital Radio interview in 1977 are the following:

Funhouse –The Stooges, Hawkwind, Captain Beefheart, Tago Mago – Can, T-Rex, Gary Glitter, 'New Musical Express (NME) Rock types', Arthur Brown, David Bowie, Alice Cooper, The Black Byrds (Donald Byrd), The Ohio Players, 'Soul/Dance groups', Reggae sound systems/Dub, Bitches Brew – Miles Davis, The Kinks, Iggy Pop, Nadir's Big Chance – Peter Hammill, Van Der Graaf Generator, John Cale, Lou Reed, Life is Just Beginning – The Creation, Sweet Surrender – Tim Buckley, Neil Young, Dr. Alimantado, Roxy Music, Waiting for the Sun – The Doors, Irish and Scottish Folk music, Vivien Jackson and the Prophets, 'never Yes', 'not NY Punk' and not 'Mike Oldfield, Faust, Henry Cow or Gong' [but obviously aware of these Virgin artists before the Pistols signed to the label]

This eclectic selection of musics, some specifically consumed by Lydon, others 'around' Lydon in the 1970s, gives some indication of the breadth of his interest in music, and formed part of the bank of works underpinning Lydon's musical possibles. He also had a knowledge and appreciation of what Bourdieu may have viewed as orthodox cultural capital. For example, in literature, he highly rated Oscar Wilde and Ted Hughes, hated James Joyce and later read Muriel Spark (from whom the name Public Image Ltd was derived). As a vocalist and 'wordsmith', this would seem to be essential to acknowledge.

According to his autobiography, Lydon was seldom if ever on the dole before

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the Sex Pistols (working in children's play schemes and with his father) and could afford to put together an extensive record collection. This work ethic and experience is contrary to expectations set up in punk documentaries and *The Filth and the Fury* (Temple 2000) which portray social issues such as unemployment (at relatively similar levels to 2003), and economic and social decay as central to the rise of punk (perplexingly often backed by images of rubbish on the streets of London in the *post-punk* 1978/1979 winter of discontent?). This consumption of diverse musics became an idiomatic bank of symbolic resources when 'applied' in Lydon's musical creative practice.

It has to be noted that how subjectivity is formed from, and how identity connects with, musical tastes is not clear-cut. There is no simple dialogical relationship between musical texts and Lydon as reader/performer. In fact it is better to describe the relationship as a polyological one across time, as Negus does in identifying the complex nature of the developments of rock as a genre at a different cultural level (Negus 1996, p. 163). Frith suggests 'Music constructs our identity through the direct experiences it offers the body, time and sociability, experiences which enable us to place ourselves in imaginative cultural narratives' (Frith 1996, p. 275). Lydon's musical subjectivity and identity developed through the music he consumed and created, and the imaginative diversity of his familiar bank of works in his formative years is an important indicator of his musical individualism, and underpinned the narrative of self he was formulating pre- and post-punk. Though we may debate the 'mechanics' of the relationship of the consumption of music to Lydon's identity, we can suggest that Lydon's subjectivity and identity, like all listeners, can be located in and mapped through music (and crucially, through what is NOT in a record collection or bank of works).

Importantly, Lydon indicates that he did not find an affinity with the other Sex Pistols through his bank of works. Lydon suggests this caused tension with the rest of the band, who he felt had a restricted range of cultural capital and as such a restricted sense of possibles. Lydon characterised such tensions by stating 'Steve, Paul, Malcolm, Glen, Sid . . . rarely mingled with music or the *possibilities* [my emphasis] . . . they would slag off bands and not know who or what they were talking about. Malcolm guided Steve and Paul into a regressive sixties mod band vibe . . . I knew more of what I was talking about' (Lydon 1993, p. 158). We should not take this at face value, but this is Lydon explaining something of the difficulties in the social production of music where band members resist compromise due to the sense their identity is being subsumed into an impersonal whole. This resistance demonstrates that though a musician may narrate a sense of musical direction, a band always requires negotiation and the temporary settlement of perceived differences. Lydon gave an instance of the creative conflict this caused in the Sex Pistols when he wrote

> The band would say 'let's do a Kinks-style song'. I'd ask 'Which album? I've got 15. Would you like to pick out a track? . . . they didn't know the range of Ray Davies's music . . . 'How dare you know, and why can't you be like the rest of us? Vague. Muddled. Indifferent'. (Lydon 1993, p.159)

Whatever the veracity of this reconstruction of exchanges, this example does indicate Lydon positioning himself as an outsider in having other creative priorities than Cook, Jones, Matlock and Vicious. This positioning is part of the narrative constructed by Lydon to explain his eventual alienation from the Pistols, and

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treated as such is an important insight into musical conflicts of the Pistols and in the punk period as a whole.

This internal tension between Lydon and the Pistols, between different levels of knowledge, cultural resources and capital, though apparently the band members were all of one class, demonstrates the inadequacy of class-based analyses of music and creativity. To an extent it also demonstrates the inadequacy of cultural capital as a concept if it is too closely aligned to simplistic notions of class specificity and social hierarchy. It is untenable to draw an undeviating relationship between a head of household's (usually father's) occupation or employment status, and specific musical tastes and lifestyles. Bourdieu (1973) suggests that cultural capital – cultural competences (knowledge and skills) that are inculcated through family and the educational systems' investment in the values of dominant middle- and upper-class culture – enables the individual to be culturally competent in their specific class position. It also enables families, generation by generation, to financially succeed and rise through society by economically capitalising on cultural capital. This does not explain how cultural resources drawn from working-class and anti-establishment sources enabled Lydon, an uneducated, but bright, impoverished working-class youth, to creatively and financially capitalise on his seemingly anti-hegemonic cultural capital. His deployment of cultural capital was clearly founded on class antagonism rather than deference. Therefore it is important to note that cultural capital is not dependent on an investment in dominant culture for legitimation. In contemporary society, cultural capital can be oppositional, illegitimate and deployed against dominant values (as in punk) and still enable the individual to capitalise on their efforts. This may only be as long as this opposition is symbolic, sanctioned, cultural and/or containable.

Steve Jones revealingly described Lydon as an intellectual in *The Filth & the Fury*, contradicting Lydon's resolute claims to anti-intellectualism. This is due to his identification of intellect with University education, the middle and upper classes and conscious rationality in the abstract rather than direct 'unconscious' cultural action. Lydon's appearance on (ironically) Capital Radio exacerbated the tensions, creating further cracks in the frail united front of the Sex Pistols, and caused confusion for the nascent punk audience. Pistols' manager Malcolm McLaren was angry at Lydon flaunting his good taste and relatively sophisticated cultural capital in public. Lydon said of this reaction, 'it seemed to mean that if I liked records that I couldn't be half as ignorant, moronic, violent, destructive etc. as they wanted to promote me as' (quoted in *Johnny's Immaculate Conception*, 1978).

Lydon, however, was not deploying his cultural capital to dislocate himself from his class roots and to move upwards through the social order, though his attitudes to class are ambivalent. He has a strong nostalgic attachment to notions of English working-class community, and in describing growing up in Finsbury Park he states it was 'Very, very violent . . . It was heavy, gangy, but with a very, very close sense of community – that kind of working-class thing where local pubs were quite literally community centres' (Karin 2001, p. 12). However, Lydon demonstrates that to map a working-class subjectivity (whatever that is) onto him simplifies beyond recognition the complex subject performed through diverse personal, social and cultural markers of identity. Lydon was working class, but his musical/cultural capital enabled him to imagine alternative identities, and operate within, around and beyond such an essentialising categorisation – being working class did not alone define him. He noted, in an unconscious allusion to Bourdieu's (1984)

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work on cultural distinction, that 'When you grow up in a working-class environment, you're supposed to stay inside and follow the rules and regulations of that little system. I won't have any of that' (Lydon 1993, p. 311). This demonstrates Lydon's ambivalence to class as both representing groundedness and, echoing Bourdieu, social constriction. In fact in Britain in the 1970s these 'rules and regulations' were being attacked from many quarters. Punk dramatised social changes that were eroding deference, the British class system, high and popular cultural boundaries, and this became conflated with the apparent attack made by the Pistols on 'middle-class' progressive rock. This attack was not launched from a position of socialist class solidarity, but from a class-informed hyper-individualist stance that was suspicious of tradition and conformity of any form. Lydon's identity cannot be reduced to being working class, but neither can he escape class as it underwrote his anger and yearning to attack and offend the British establishment.

Lydon felt the Pistols had quickly exhausted their possibilities and his own, and that his contribution had been little understood or appreciated. Laing discussed the split within the Sex Pistols as central to a paradox at the heart of the punk, which unravelled due to the problem of punk identity:

> Punk rock possessed an impulse to construct an identity that would be an alternative to the institutionalised or *passé* identities of the status quo, but would nevertheless be recognisable. The identity would be associated with all features gathered together under the sign of 'subculture'. But punk rock also contained impulses which aimed to dissolve identities – of 'performer', 'audience', 'rock and roll' – without any concern to make new ones. (Laing 1985, p.131)

The consistent nihilistic impulse to subvert the establishment or 'mainstream' identity at the heart of Lydon's Rotten persona left him exhausted. Lydon was particularly exasperated at the formation of the punk subculture and its 'rules and regulations' which he felt antithetical to his calls for absolute individualism. Lydon characterised his politics by writing:

> I'm not a revolutionary, socialist or any of that . . . An absolute sense of individuality is my politics. All political groups that I am aware of on this planet strive to suppress individuality . . . It's replacing the same old system with a different clothing . . . it destroys personality and individuality. (Lydon 1993, p. 311)

Lydon sees himself as committed to the continual re-invention of self, believing in absolute agency within the creation of identity and this belief formed the basis of his dissolution of the Rotten persona. Lydon suggests he formed PiL to enable a more democratic and 'liberal' creative process, principally with Keith Levene and Jah Wobble. Lydon felt PiL would enable him to distance himself from punk by cutting ties with Rotten. He characterised this shift by saying:

> I formed PiL because I got bored with the extremist point of view that I'd had with the Sex Pistols . . . I attempted to move toward a liberal point of view and see if that could slowly but surely change society into something more decent . . . PiL [was] much more of a democracy . . . I thought Ha! The Public Image Limited. Not as a company but to be limited – not being as 'out there' as I was with the Sex Pistols'. (Lydon 1993, p. 270)

Whether Lydon achieved or pursued this liberal viewpoint is debatable, but PiL was possibly for a time a more democratic collaboration than the Sex Pistols. PiL also encapsulated the contradiction between the struggle for individual status and the utopian drive to change the world through music, identified by Toynbee, and which perhaps was implicit in the cash through chaos ethos of the Sex Pistols. We

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should not, however, diminish the contributions of the other Sex Pistols or McLaren who are as equally important in understanding the band and their music. Lydon himself argues this by saying

> It's such an intense process being in a band, but some of the books out there never understood that . . . you should never leave any single member in a band up to their own devices. I don't care how big-headed the lead singer is, it all comes down to the fact that he must eat shit in a rehearsal room. The histrionics of the lead guitar, the excesses of the drummer, and the stupidity of the bass player have to mix on equal footing. (Lydon 1994, p. 160)

In acknowledging the rest of the Pistols, it is interesting that Lydon undercuts the affirmation of their contributions with a descriptive put down of each band member (including himself). With PiL it is important to more clearly address the contribution of Levene and Wobble due to the ostensibly democratic principles of the band (with no svengali overseeing operations and only trusted personnel involved in the PiL corporation) while most specifically focusing on Lydon, as this is the purpose of this study.

Know future! Lydon and PiL

> Krautrock is what Punk would have been if Johnny Rotten alone had been in charge – a kind of Pagan Freakout LSD Explore-the-god-in-you-by-working-the-animal-in-you Gnostic Odyssey. A sort of very fit Hawkwind without the Doomsday Science-Fiction. (Cope 1995, p. 1)

PiL were formed post-Pistols in 1978, with Lydon bringing together his friend John Wardle (Jah Wobble) and Keith Levene – an acquaintance he had met some time before at an early Clash and Sex Pistols joint gig – and Jim Walker, the first in a succession of drummers. In considering PiL, it is important to expand briefly on the roles of Levene and Wobble. Like Lydon, it becomes apparent that what we find is a musical sensibility and set of expectations of what is possible with popular music that was enabled and empowered by punk but was not beholden to it. Unlike Lydon, the subject of obsessive interest, it should be noted there is a relative paucity of material on the role of Levene and Wobble, either from the late 1970s or since.

Levene at an early age was listening to ska and rock-steady, and aged ten to the Beatles' White Album, Led Zeppelin and early Heavy Metal. This culminated in what he surprisingly – for the punk audience – describes as 'my absolute godhead band, Yes' and suggests 'Steve Howe was the greatest fucking guitarist in the world' (Gross 1999). He saw five Yes gigs in a row in 1972 and became a Yes roadie for a short while. He was an accomplished guitarist and mentions the Allman Brothers, Ornette Coleman protégé James 'Blood' Ulmer, Charles Mingus, Steely Dan and American west coast rock (Reynolds 2002, p. 33) as other key figures in his close field of works. This again is compelling evidence of the need to rethink the progressive/punk dialectic and the role of diverse musical influences in the punk and post-punk period. Levene before PiL was involved in the early days of the Clash, remaining largely uncredited on their first album, and joined the Flowers of Romance with Sid Vicious. He suggests that in relation to musical creativity he shared with Lydon a desire to promulgate change, but not to use anger or despair as negatives. He said, 'I wasn't against anything. I call it being positively negative . . . When people were talking about this nihilist thing and ''no future'', my thing was ''know future''' (Levene, quoted in Gross 1999).

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Jah Wobble never viewed himself as a musician before joining PiL, but had an encyclopaedic knowledge of dub. This lack of aspiration to, or reverence for, rock musicianship – shared with Lydon – resulted in openness to sonic and musical experimentation removed from the circumscribed field of rock and roll. He was drawn particularly to innovation through overt hybridisation – by deploying dub bass in a bleak post-punk soundscape. Wobble left after the second PiL album, *Metal Box* (1979), and his later prolific work with world musicians, members of Can, The Orb and others demonstrates a view of musical possibles that, though embryonic in PiL, was a predisposition that evidenced itself in his dub side projects while a member of the band and soon after.

PiL was a vehicle for Lydon to pursue an avant-garde noise aesthetic he felt the Sex Pistols only fleetingly achieved when they performed badly. He looked towards Krautrock, dub and other experimental musics as inspiration. He aimed to further develop his 'instrument' – a voice with remarkable flexibility, an instantly recognisable 'grain' (Barthes 1977) and an ability to draw on various performative vocal, spoken, part-sung strategies that were more extensive and diverse than the Sex Pistols' angry sneer. Recently Lydon was asked how he would define what he was attempting to achieve in music at the time, and his answer may give some indication of how he perceived the transition from the Pistols to PiL:

> There were no rules. There was nothing to follow. You could do what you wanted. But then that's too big a freedom, so you had to focus yourself on specific things that interest just you. So in a weird way that's great because you're not pandering to public taste and you're not doing this to be popular and then oddly enough you become popular and you don't know why. It's a coincidence. It's not a deliberate plan or scheme. No one could ever, ever put that together as a plan. (quoted in Karin 2001, p. 15)

Lydon ambitiously claims musical autonomy and the ability to escape pre-existing musical forms in attempting to dislocate PiL from what punk had become by 1978. He also returns to the idea of 'rules and regulations' constraining his creativity, but this time forges rules of his own making, found through constructing music through experimental creative practice. We can suggest Lydon was absolutely reliant on his ability to negotiate a diverse field of generally left-field musical works in this exploration, and throughout PiL's early work the strategies, textures and musicality of Can, Neu!, Captain Beefheart, Brian Eno, Lee Perry and Hammill, among many others, can be traced. These were musics that were progressive in intent and that questioned the constraining boundaries of previous rock forms and production. PiL were therefore 'reaching backwards' through punk as well as retaining the iconoclastic attitude to tradition and conformity that was often found in these musics, punk, and indeed, progressive rock.

Considering PiL as a band requires us to question Lydon's claims of coincidence without a deliberate plan. PiL often seemed to be a band with a master plan, no matter how contradictory, confusing and unsuccessful this may have been. PiL in interviews of the 1978–1980 period consistently positioned themselves as both anti-rock and roll and a communications company with the potential to move into video and business ventures, including new technologies and advertising. PiL were aware of themselves as an exploitable record company commodity and in the spirit of the times embraced enterprise culture. However, they arguably had neither the business acumen nor economic and cultural capital to succeed in this venture. It could be suggested that PiL were ironically positioning themselves as a company in a parody of their label Virgin Records, and of the machinations of the music

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industry. It can also be argued that they were critiquing the 'DIY ethic' of punk counter-culturality, as represented in Crass, by suggesting that it lacked ambition by positioning itself in a backwater of home-spun cultural production. What is clear is that PiL were not specifically or demonstrably pursuing an explicit or coherent anti-capitalist critique, even if there was intentional irony in their public pronouncements.

PiL felt they should be able to take Virgin on at their own game. Levene audaciously stated at the time 'I'm thinking of ways to work with Virgin and Virgin to work for us . . . I don't see why Virgin shouldn't be a worthwhile company to be involved in . . . but there seems to be a clash of ambitions . . . It's simple, we can see into the future and they can't' ('Company lore and public disorder', *NME* 1981). This confidence may have resulted from a desire to subvert the backward-looking counter-culturality that had begun to appear in some areas of post-punk by embracing corporate capitalism as, ironically, a counter-counter-cultural statement. However, considering the ensuing growth of the Virgin brand across planes, trains, coke and radio, it would seem Virgin were more clued up on the future of the global brandscape than PiL, though they had grasped that the rise of new mass communication technologies and the proliferation of media culture were significant trends. However, despite this ill-advised but prescient positioning of PiL as a media corporation, they were the producers of innovative and powerful music that owed a great deal to the experimentation of post-1960s counter-cultural rock.

Levene developed an improvised anti-rock and roll guitar technique specifically drawing from avant-jazz and noise experimentalist James 'Blood' Ulmer and to some extent Yes's Steve Howe (Reynolds 2002, p. 33). Improvisation in itself is not a peculiarity of avant-garde music, as most rock bands improvise in constructing songs. But to improvise towards a rock song is not the same as improvising to deconstruct the rock song. Levene also had an interest in technical innovation, synthesizers and, with Lydon, new studio recording strategies and techniques antithetical to punk notions of immediacy (but sharing much in common with progressive Krautrock). It should be pointed out that contrary to expectations, the Sex Pistols were a relatively conventional rock band when it came to studio recording.[5] *Never Mind the Bollocks* producer Chris Thomas (engineer for The Beatles, mixing supervisor for Pink Floyd and producer of Roxy Music) did not pursue 'punk immediacy' in the many guitar overdubs and polished production of the album recorded intermittently over a year. This was done with the blessing of a largely deferential Sex Pistols (Cunningham 1998) and with Steve Jones also playing bass guitar in place of Matlock and Vicious. It is also worth noting that in early Pistols live performances and demos, sound engineer Dave Goodman would create a distinctly Kosmiche psychedelic wash of sound through using delay and phasing effects on Lydon's vocals and guitars that bore some resemblance to Julian Cope's fantasy vision of a Lydonesque 'krautpunk'.[6]

Levene discussed his studio strategy in terms that contradict Lydon, suggesting that he saw rules as a way of constructing PiL's music because they were also something to challenge and kick against. This reflects the dichotomy between structure and agency central to creativity within popular music – all popular music is structured through past rules and innovation is based on new combinations of techniques and strategies. Levene suggests that the PiL studio process owed something to Brian Eno's 'oblique strategies' by stating

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> It's almost like I had all these strict rules, but my biggest rule was to break the rules. But sometimes I'd set up my own rules to kick them down. I had a situation where I was really into process in the studio and things you could get using the desk as an instrument. That was meant for perfecting what I used it for was to rip the stuff apart. You could draw an analogy with Brian Eno . . . He was one of the first 'soundicians'. (Levene quoted in Gross 1999)

Levene was at one with Lydon in relation to the need to develop and refine strategies that took PiL to what they felt were the outer margins of (anti) rock and roll. PiL initially used drums, guitar, bass and vocals as the engine of their sound, but by *Flowers of Romance* (1981) these were ditched for free improvisation with unfamiliar ethnic instruments, cellos, synthesizers and vast drums.

PiL produced uncompromising music that in tone and content was partly based on Lydon's personal despair (bereft of the Sex Pistols, his stage name, his mother through cancer and his friend Sid Vicious). This despair was also targeted at the punks who had adopted a uniform identity and code of conduct in response to his calls for people to be themselves, for individualism and diversity. This despair found its greatest release in *Metal Box* (1979) which was recorded and composed in process with improvised songs beginning and ending at apparently random moments. It is bleak but not unemotional – 'Death Disco/Swan Lake' being a malevolent lament for Lydon's recently dead mother. In common with Eno, the studio became a key instrument rather than a medium through which a heavily prescribed rock noise was constructed. Levene drew inspiration from machine noises in a basement toilet studio bolthole, unlearned and unleashed his guitar technique and deployed random synthesizer noise. Lydon in 'Poptones' spoke, recited and sang lyrics with a tone moving from sharp clarity to mumbled incomprehensibility with his voice 'equivocal' – no more or less important than other elements of the PiL soundscape. Wobble improvised dub bass that complemented rather than copied Levene's guitar lines. Richard Dudanski and Martin Atkins on drums provided a rhythm that, in any other context would be described as a 4/4 disco beat – 'Death Disco/Swan Lake' was indeed funereal dance music. PiL were not being flippant with such a description. The album finishes with 'Radio 4', a pseudo-classical instrumental piece created by Levene multi-tracking synthesized string parts and mimicking Wobble's bass style.

Metal Box's embrace of noise as purposeful message, its improvised and formal experimentation, its refusal to sustain the Lydon public persona and, for a time, its democracy of diverse voices created troubling music. An understanding that this music was a road to somewhere as opposed to the Pistols' demand to exist and remain in the present is crucial. Being here now and 'no futurism' prematurely curtails utopian thinking and creativity; the consequence of existing in a hermetically sealed present is atrophy.

PiL demonstrated the futility and dishonesty of denying personal and musical history, of the year-zero rhetoric of punk, of working through a regimented and unreflexive field of musical possibility and of denying the prospect of a viable future. The 'Know Future' of PiL was an assertion that to achieve 'change' through music required the deconstruction of punk/rock and roll as music and industry. PiL (anti)-intellectualised their music and located it in a different paradigm or field of works to that of punk. They were at the forefront of post-punk anti-mainstream experimentation, but adopted the trappings of a capitalist corporation, and *Metal*

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Box embodied this contradictory sense of 'industry'. If we view *Metal Box* through the lens of Weinstein's proposition that 'progressive rock is distinguished by a conceptual trope: the appropriation of nonpopular musical forms . . . ''classical music'', jazz and avant-garde music', this album can arguably, and controversially, be characterised as a re-cast version of progressive rock.

PiL forged hybrid soundscapes from a wide range of cultural and sonic resources and it was their appreciation of the *possibles* outside of the immediate rock/punk field of textual and musical works, and Virgin and Warner Records financial support that enabled them to pursue this project in the full glare of (limited) publicity. Much that PiL achieved in their first three studio albums was a template for later post-progressive/post-rock artists. Their key importance was in breaking out of generic punk constriction into a more flexible field of creative musical practice – celebrating hybridisation and heterogeneity over homogenisation, claustrophobia and creative suffocation. The most interesting British musics since punk have arguably been those that are not beholden to creative tradition and which, like PiL, cut across musical and cultural boundaries (e.g. The Pop Group, A Certain Ratio, Asian Dub Foundation, Massive Attack, Tricky, Big Audio Dynamite, Alabama 3).

Conclusion

This study of John Lydon demonstrates the importance, and possibility, of taking seriously the personal narratives of musicians as they experience or reflect on their creative process. It has suggested how this gives us access to understanding how Lydon and other musicians deploy their cultural capital in ways requiring us to question Bourdieu's theories on the role of objective relations in producing social identity, and in underpinning musical creativity. Lydon's active, trans-class reconfiguration of his personal and cultural capital placed him, his music and the audience in a relatively new performative and challenging sonic space that was shared with other post-punk and progressive musicians. In particular, PiL demonstrated that the class-based prog/punk dialectic is unfeasible as a historical model of change in popular music in the 1970s. The anti-representational and oppositional strategies of PiL were clearly antagonistic to some areas of 'middle-class' progressive rock, particularly in their opposition to pre-existing and orthodox hierarchies of cultural taste and value. However, they shared with progressive musicians such as Eno, Hammill, Neu!, Can and Fripp a counter-culturality, an art sensibility, a discomfort with music as industry, a belief in absolute individualism and a sense of music's potential as a utopian cultural force.

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Endnotes

1. For Bourdieu, cultural capital = the cultural resources an individual has access to through family background and education enabling them to have cultural competence and 'literacy' in relation to their relative class position. In this sense, cultural capital affirms the social order. However, in this article cultural capital is used more broadly to describe cultural resources that can be deployed against, as well as in support of, the social order. Lydon's idiosyncratic personally valued cultural resources were not validated by the established social order, but became culturally valuable in constructing works that questioned late-1970s Britain while breaching the divide of progressive rock and punk.
2. Rotten quoted in 'Capital Radio Johnny Rotten Interview (Excerpt)', 16 July 1977. 6 August 2001: <www.vub.ac.be/STER/KoenWWW/Ph/Links/dig073.txt>
3. Hammill, P., 're. Nadir's Big Chance', e-mail to author. 7 September 2001.
4. He now flits between the names Lydon and Rotten after reclaiming the right to his stage persona after suing Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren and Glitterbest in the 1980s.
5. *Classic Albums: Never Mind the Bollocks* (ITV1, 2002).
6. Dave Goodman told me this in 1989 when I recorded a WMTID album at his London home, during an all-night Pistols nostalgia and drinks session, and I have no reason to doubt his word. Evidence can be found on Sex Pistols 'Sexbox' (e.g. CD1, Track 14, 'No Feeling' (*sic*)).

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