8 Suburban Revolt

Punk Fanzines and Formative Politics c. 1976–1986

Matthew Worley

Let us rescue from the 'enormous condescension of posterity' a young teenager called Paul, travelling to work in London on a commuter train in late 1979.[1] He has just left school and started a full time job. He doesn't like it very much; nor is he happy about his favourite punk bands 'selling out' to become pop stars. To vent his spleen, he has started a fanzine, a self-produced magazine called *Suburban Revolt* that rails against gig prices and the apathy of his peers. Cut from a newspaper and glued to page two is a strapline asking: 'Are You a Tired Commuter?'. On the back page, the 'Top 20 TV Programmes' for the week ending 9 September 1979 are listed, above which Paul has written: 'No wonder the country's in a mess'. 'My attitudes have changed gradually from the 1st copy', he writes in the editorial to issue two. Now Paul is asking questions and looking for answers. In a passage with erratic grammar, punctuation and spelling, he surveyed the political landscape.

> It is punk to hate capitalists so therefore they must hate socialism less. IT is punk to hate Conservatives so therefore they must hate Labour less. Apart from Crass and anarchists who hate them both …. [But] If punks fear 1984 which I also do then surely the way to stop that happening is by capitalism i.e. the Conservatives. With Socialism all you have to do is take away the democracy and you have communism which is the 1984 situation. Although capitalism is when you have 7 day working weeks, ridicously low wages, no unions e.t.c., which isn't much better. THE solution I think with my o level economics is either middle way, which I susspose is Labour[,] or anarchy which wouldn't work … P.S. I suppose under socialism the country doesn't end up with shitty things that noone really needs or wants which just use up the world's resources. P.P.S. WE LIVE IN A DEMOCRACY BUT WHOEVER YOU VOTE FOR THE GOVERNMENT WILL GET IN.[2]

[1] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 2012 edition), p. 12.
[2] *Suburban Revolt*, 2 (1979/80), p. 8.

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Needless to say, Paul's analysis reads crudely. The backdrop was provided by the May 1979 general election, from which Margaret Thatcher's Conservative Party emerged victorious and began to transform the British polity. Discourses of 'crisis' and 'decline' underpinned media and political perspectives, wrangling with socio-cultural changes that prompted concern as to the 'permissiveness' associated with the 1960s. Orwell is evoked, perhaps another remnant from a recently taken O-Level exam resonating with portents of an authoritarian response to Britain's apparent malaise? Anarchy, introduced to pop's lexicon by the Sex Pistols' 'Anarchy in the UK' in 1976, begins to mean more than just a punk signifier, informing the ideas and praxis that defined the 'post-punk' period for many young people into the 1980s. As such, mention of the overtly anarchist band Crass reveals a pertinent soundtrack to Paul's political fumblings. He is young and working things out; he is trying to make sense of the world. Like many others whose authors were enthused by punk and fired by disaffections both deep and shallow, his fanzine offered a medium to test ideas and seek a dialogue. A 'safe space' (in modern parlance) to designate a genre of political writing where formative ideas – generally progressive, but also often reactionary and dismissively 'anti-politics' – could be tested and articulated.

Ripped & Torn: Punk Fanzines

Fanzines have a pre-, post- and extra-punk history. The roots of fanzine culture are typically traced back to the coining of the term by the US science fiction (sci-fi) aficionado Russ Chauvenet.[3] Writing in the October 1940 issue of his own *Detours* publication, Chauvenet sought to distinguish between self-produced magazines disseminated in relatively small numbers by hand or by post to communities of 'fans' ('fanzines'), and professional magazines published regularly and distributed widely in greater print runs to shops and suppliers for general sale ('prozines'). As a result, fanzines first became associated with cheaply produced sci-fi publications circulating around small-but-dispersed communities in the US and Britain from the 1940s, before later earning a wider remit in relation to similarly amateur efforts focused on an assortment of fan-based cultural forms ranging from TV programmes and pop groups to film stars and football. Today, fanzines continue to proliferate, both in relation to ongoing cultural obsessions

[3] Teal Triggs, *Fanzines* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), p. 10. For an early history of fanzines, see Fredric Wertham, *The World of Fanzines* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973).

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and, as 'zines', to an array of activist and lifestyle concerns.[4] Indeed, more recent studies of (fan)zines have embedded the medium within a feminist lineage and/or recognised the form as part of a wider history of self-publishing that encompasses everything from artistic bulletins and 'little magazines' to samizdat missives and the countercultural press.[5]

Punk – meaning here the youth culture emergent in the UK from the mid-1970s imbued with an ethos of do-it-yourself – was integral to the reimagination of a fanzine's initial form and function.[6] The songs and imagery of the Sex Pistols and The Clash lent punk a seditious and oppositional quality, offering angry bursts of invective that reflected and railed against the banalities and brutalities of everyday life. Culturally, punk was located in opposition to the vapidity and perceived irrelevance of 1970s pop and rock. In the music paper *Sounds*, the journalist Jonh Ingham wrote of 'boundaries being drawn by the [Sex] Pistols', boundaries he later recognised as a youthful irreverence for rock's pantheon and a rejection of 1970s countercultural motifs: straight trousers replaced flares; short hair replaced long; musical immediacy replaced considered virtuosity; songs of hate and war replaced songs of love and peace; an emphasis on *doing* challenged commodity culture's reliance on the spectator and consumer; engaging with replaced dropping out. 'The great ignorant public don't know why we're in a band', Johnny Rotten was quoted as saying: 'It's because we're bored with all the old crap. Like every decent human being should be'.[7]

Punk fanzines thereby sought to further challenge and provoke, transferring punk-related attitudes and aesthetics towards writing and design. Pre-punk fanzines were rudimentarily produced but conformed generally to practical layouts, with text organised in columns and images either drawn neatly or stuck into grids to be duplicated on machines maintained by community workshops, local printers or colleges. By contrast, and through a combination of accident and intent, punk's fanzines revealed and revelled in the cut 'n' paste method of their creation, incorporating collage and exaggerating the improvised nature of

[4] Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (Bloomington: Microcosm, 1997).
[5] See, for example, Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); Matthew Worley, *Zerox Machine: Punk, Post-Punk and Fanzines in Britain, 1976–1988* (London: Reaktion, 2024).
[6] Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–84* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
[7] Jonh Ingham, 'Anarchy in the UK', *Sounds*, 31 July 1976, p. 41 and 'Welcome to the (?) Rock Special', *Sounds*, 9 October 1976, pp. 22–27.

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production.[8] Most famously, they were often pasted-up and then printed on the Xerox photocopying machines becoming gradually more accessible over the mid-to-late 1970s. To this end, punk fanzines looked *immediate* and chaotic, complementing the angsty urgency of the wider culture and the bricolage nature of punk aesthetics.

More important for our purposes, punk also changed the tone and temper of fanzine discourse, critically engaging with – rather than eulogising or simply documenting – the culture on which it commentated. Pre-punk fanzines might be described as comprising 'philatelic … attention to the finest details', compiling potted histories and fanatical lists of favoured artists. By contrast, the self-avowed punk fanzines that emerged in the wake of Mark Perry's *Sniffin' Glue* in the summer of 1976 typically eschewed facts and precision for excitable bursts of opinionated prose.[9] 'Who wants history'?, Perry asked in late 1976: 'I only care about the future.'[10] Rather than record and recollect the past, punk fanzines documented *the now*, filtering punk's cultural challenge through critical diatribes against rich rock 'stars' (*Ripped & Torn*) and the hypocrisy of 'ITV and the rest of the media' (*Bondage*).[11] Instead of positively obsessing about a band or even punk more generally, punk's media was typically demanding and aggressive. Very soon, the term 'fanzine' was itself rejected by some who deemed it an unsuitable moniker for a medium designed specifically to challenge – or at least provide an alternative to – the perceived mainstream media. 'The "fan" bit implies slave like following of the "in" bands', Mike Diboll commented in his *Toxic Grafity* from late 1979. 'I prefer the title "punkzine", the anarchic, uncompromising spirit of punk expressed through a cheaply produced magazine, not the latest on [commercial artists such as] the Boomtown Rats.'[12]

As this suggests, fanzines were repurposed through their association with punk. No longer a staid medium dominated by men in their

[8] Teal Triggs, 'Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic', *Journal of Design History*, 19:1 (2006), 69–83; Russ Bestley, 'Kicks in Style: A Punk Design Aesthetic', in George McKay and Gina Arnold (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025); Russ Bestley and Paul Burgess, 'Fan Artefacts and Doing It Themselves: The Home-Made Graphics of Punk Devotees', *Punk & Post-Punk*, 7:3 (2018), 317–40.

[9] Nick Kimberley quoted in Michael Watts, Geoff Brown and Allan Jones, 'Read All About It', *Melody Maker*, 20 March 1976, pp. 28–30. Kimberly was the co-author of *Pressure Drop*, a reggae fanzine.

[10] *Sniffin' Glue*, 5 (1976), p. 7.

[11] D. Tony, 'Can Rich "Stars" Rock?', *Ripped & Torn*, 1 (1976), p. 5; Shane MacGowan, 'It's 1976 OK An You Still Can't Say Fuck On TV', *Bondage*, 1 (1976), p. 2.

[12] *Toxic Grafity*, 4 (1979), p. 23.

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twenties and thirties, punk's fanzines were claimed by teenagers inspired by a cultural provocation that extolled the virtues of agency and autonomy.[13] In particular, once the Sex Pistols – and, by extension, punks – found themselves subject to a media-generated moral panic afforded by tales of violence and swearing live on teatime television, so cultural disaffection fuelled delinquent expectation.[14] A treacherous response to Elizabeth II's 1977 Silver Jubilee sealed the deal, as the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' rose to the top of the charts and offered an alternative reading of 'England's dreaming'.[15] Punk was thereby perceived as avowedly anti-establishment; its *modus operandi* subversive. For those who wished to use it, punk afforded a political space to comment, critique and condemn.

Fanzines provided one means of doing so. They were typically made in bedrooms, in the parental front room, or perhaps at the kitchen table of a shared house. Some were sole-authored, but friends and acquaintances often contributed, with many fanzines being collective efforts comprising text, poems, artworks and photography submitted as-and-when. Visually and textually, images were sourced from existing music papers and culled from magazines or books. These were then cut out and reused alongside typed or handwritten record and gig reviews. Early on, tabloid straplines were spliced into collages that located punk in the here and now, a cultural response to a mediascape of shock-horror headlines and bland tabloid/advertising copy. Band interviews were common, the product of scattergun questions offered before or after gigs. Brief editorials might, in the first issue, provide a rationale for making a fanzine. More often than not, these took aim at the music press' disconnection from what was happening 'on the ground' and cited boredom as an impulse to act/participate.[16]

Once completed, titles could be one-offs or continue for a handful of issues, with print runs ranging from the tens to the hundreds. There were exceptions, of course, with some fanzines – such as *Sniffin' Glue* and

[13] The demographics of punk fanzine production are all but impossible to measure with any accuracy. Generally, however, they were made by teenagers from both working- and middle-class backgrounds. Males predominated, but female-fronted fanzines and female contributions were always apparent from 1976 onwards. Racially, punk fanzines reflected the primarily white-ethnic basis of the culture.

[14] Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991).

[15] Sex Pistols, 'God Save the Queen' b/w 'Did You No Wrong' (Virgin, 1977).

[16] For just one of hundreds of examples, see *Sideburns*, 1 (1977).

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Jamming! – becoming popular enough to warrant runs of thousands.[17] But in terms of distribution, copies were usually sold at gigs or left with local record and book shops on a sale-or-return basis. In London, Compendium Books in Camden and Rough Trade in Ladbroke Grove were mainstays, with the latter soon offering a distribution service that allowed for mail order and sales to shops beyond the capital. From 1979, the nearby Better Badges provided printing presses to become a productive hub for countless titles into the early 1980s. With prices ranging from 5p to 50p, dropping relatively over time as access to printing became easier and cheaper, fanzines were often a costly alternative to national music press titles such as *NME*, *Melody Maker* and *Sounds* selling for between 18p and 20p in mid-1979. Yet they claimed a cultural cachet in their being untainted by commerciality and retaining a closer connection to the scenes and musics covered. By the end of the 1970s, most – if not all – towns and cities in the UK had at least one punk-related fanzine in circulation at any particular time.

Amidst all this, networks formed and correspondence ensued. Fanzines were swapped, shared, collected and discarded. What, for the most part, appeared ephemeral products of youthful enthusiasm served simultaneously as a means of communication within and across divergent punk and punk-related cultures. Music predominated, but politics too found expression, as punk critically engaged with the world of which it was part. If punk really was subversive and seditious, then fanzines help give a sense of the impulses underpinning the cultural revolt.

Acts of Defiance: Punk Writing

Punk fanzines allowed for a distinct genre of political writing to occur; that is, a recognisable style and approach to writing on or about politics particular to a preferred medium. Given that fanzines pertained to spontaneity and urgency, the prose was typically free-flowing and unstructured. If not quite stream-of-consciousness, then the text generally lacked shape or organisation. Spelling mistakes were ignored; words and sentences were often scribbled out to present a kind of idiot savant modernism. Shifts in font, or text transferring from typed text to handwritten scrawl, were also common. As a result, punk's fanzine writing read more like an impulsive outpouring of formative ideas than a completed treatise. To view essays or statements that were often short and

[17] Mark Perry, *Sniffin' Glue: The Essential Punk Accessory* (London: Sanctuary, 2000); Tony Fletcher, *The Best of Jamming!: Selections and Stories from the Fanzine that Grew Up, 1976–86* (London: Omnibus, 2021).

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impromptu is to see ideas percolating from records heard, books read or films seen. At times, opinions are being visibly worked out as the text transcribes. There are contradictions and dead ends. The focus shifts erratically from one subject to another, leaving arguments half-made or unresolved. Evidence is eschewed for emotional subjectivity and punkish affectation ('fuck the system'); text and imagery intertwine to present a collage of signifiers and reflections that proffer a structure of feeling rather than a rounded thesis. To be sure, the advent of overtly anarchist punkzines from 1979 led to more authoritative statements, often cloyingly and didactically so. But even then, a sense of exploration, a pushing to the edge or extreme, was palpable in their deconstructions of power and society. The process of writing a punk fanzine was a way of *doing* politics, formulating ideas to engender discussion and reset opinion towards subsequent action. At root, the message was always 'think for yourself' and 'do it yourself'. As with the music, a fanzine's political writing was a form of praxis: you learnt as you did it.

Political writing provided part of punk's fanzine content from the outset. This, initially, meant the small-'p' politics of enabling or providing a platform for those previously without one. Mark Perry's rationale for *Sniffin' Glue* was to give coverage to what the national music press missed, dismissed or failed to understand.[18] He encouraged others to do the same and soon concluded that it was not just the music press that needed to be challenged, but 'also the record companies …. This "new-wave" has got to take in everything, including-posters, record-covers, stage presentation, the lot! [*sic*]'.[19] For Pete Shelley, co-founder of Buzzcocks and author of the single-sheet *Plaything* fanzine, punk's new wave was 'a challenge to Consider everything you do, think and feel [*sic*]', meaning 'PERSONAL politics. The way that you react to the people around you. The ways that you love them, fuck them, hate them, slate them [*sic*]'. Typical of the genre's nascent style, he then promised to 'write more when I think of what to say'.[20] In both cases, Perry and Shelley embodied a democratisation of political writing. Paper + pen/typewriter + a thought to communicate = anyone could do it.

One of the most significant early examples of punk fanzine writing was Jon Savage's essay for the first *London's Outrage* (1976), effectively a rehearsal for what would later become his seminal history of punk's beginning, *England's Dreaming* (1991). Here Savage made use of the freedom afforded by a fanzine's form to deny all regard for censorship or stylistic etiquette. Writing in his diary on the day of the fanzine's

[18] *Sniffin' Glue*, 1 (1976).
[19] *Sniffin' Glue*, 3½ (1976), p. 4.
[20] *Plaything*, 2 (1977/8).

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creation in late November 1976, the then Jon Sage chronicled a lunch hour's respite from his job as a trainee solicitor. 'I sit on the bog attacking bits of paper with Pritt glue in a very real fervour – got to do it now … I need to give voice to those explosions in my head'.[21]

In practice, this meant a 'long improvised piece about violence, fascism, Thatcher and the impending apocalypse' interspersed with pictures of the Sex Pistols cropped from the music press alongside images of the Third Reich.[22] All around, choice quotes from Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (1933) gave a theoretical underpinning to the juxtaposition of pornography, pop culture and Nazism, with the tenor of the times captured in newspaper headlines declaring 'punk rock violence is sinister' and an advert for the gruesome horror film, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). Thus, a Reich quote such as '[the] sexual morality that inhibits the will to freedom, as well as those forces that comply with authoritarian interests, derive their energy from repressed sexuality', paved the way for a flyer-image from the ICA's 'Prostitution' exhibition concurrently causing consternation among MPs and the press for utilising public money on the repositioning of pornography to a publicly-funded gallery.[23] The essay then joined-the-dots, with Savage musing on punk's aggression and the Nazi chic employed as a provocation by those in and around the milieu close to the Sex Pistols via Malcom McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's clothes shop SEX (where British punk gestated). For Savage, punk was an exhilarating 'dance with death', the 'final vomit of a rotted society' signalling the advent of a 'peculiarly English kind of fascism'. With Margaret Thatcher appearing as the 'mother sadist' in waiting, and a salacious media revelling in portents of crisis, Savage posited punk as a cultural response to a country wracked by depression and populated by a 'sexually & socially frustrated people living off past (WW2) glories [*sic*]'. 'Anarchy indeed', he concluded at the end of several pages of prose that slipped between socio-political comment and crypto-slang terms ('eezi-wrapped package'; 'eNMEy'; 'punkismo'). 'Terminal decadence is here & will become action'.[24]

Savage's intelligence and eloquence ensured *London's Outrage* stood out from most punk fanzines of the time. He was also in his early twenties, so a little older than the typical punk fanzine producer. Nevertheless, Savage's approach exemplified the emergent genre,

[21] Jon Savage diary 30 November 1976, in his *England's Dreaming*, p. 279. [22] Ibid.
[23] *London's Outrage*, 1 (1976), p. 2; Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (London: Souvenir Press, 2008 edition, originally published 1933), p. 32.
[24] *London's Outrage*, 1 (1976).

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leading him immediately to push at its limits. The second issue of *London's Outrage* comprised Xeroxed photographs of London's urban landscape taken around Notting Hill on a Pentax camera, a topographical backdrop to punk's studied alienation. This time the images *were* the text, depicting a derelict dystopia – a veritable catalogue of corrugated iron, concrete, graffiti, tower blocks, empty houses and brick rubble left over from bomb damage/slum clearance – caught between the past and the future.[25] Next came *The Secret Public* (1978), a collaboration with the artist Linder (Linda Mulvey) that explored constructions of gender through photomontages compiled from glossy magazines. So, for example, female bodies from pornography were decorated with signifiers of domesticity, the heads and genitals replaced by cakes and household appliances. Alternately, clichéd totems of masculinity – office blocks, weapons, technology, commuting, bodybuilding – were scrambled to reconfigure their intended meaning. Again, the images worked to provide a text that decoded media representations of sex, gender and relationships to reveal their commodified ideal.[26]

Not all fanzines were so inventive. The vast majority retained a musical focus concentrated primarily on bands, gigs and records. Even so, punk's inherent critique, be it of pop culture or society more generally, ensured that political commentary often broke through. At least on occasion, the subject matter of punk's wider visual, verbal and textual discourse encouraged political enquiry and fostered opinion.

Among the early themes repeating across punk fanzine writing, as the *London's Outrage*/*Secret Public* examples suggest, were fascism/anti-fascism, gender, media distortion and commodification. These, in part, were a product of discourses and concerns resonant of the time, be it Britain's political and economic 'crisis', the rise of the National Front (NF), the influence of feminist and broadly leftist politics, or attendant concerns revolving around socio-cultural liberalisation and 'permissiveness'.[27] More to the point, such subjects were engaged with in ways that helped codify punk fanzine writing towards a genre. Two examples: *JOLT* and *No Future*/*Tacky*.

JOLT was first issued in early 1977 by Lucy Whitman, writing under the name of Lucy Toothpaste. As a feminist and socialist, Whitman was attracted to punk's rebellious spirit and the possibilities for women in a culture that recognised 'it doesn't matter if we don't know how to play

[25] *London's Outrage*, 2 (1977). [26] *The Secret Public*, 1 (1978).
[27] For two useful overviews of the time, see Andy Becket, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009); Alwyn Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis? Britain in the 1970s* (London: Aurum, 2008).

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guitar yet, we can soon learn'. To this end, she resolved to do 'lots of things on girl punks' and interviewed The Slits and X-Ray Spex over a subsequent two issues. Simultaneously, Whitman took up the question of 'punk and fascism', lamenting those who wore swastikas for effect and musing on the irrationality of a politics she felt was 'getting a stronger + stronger grip in Britain at the moment (in the state, the army & police as well as the NF) [*sic*]'.[28] Not surprisingly, Whitman soon aligned her concerns with broader movements such as Rock Against Racism (RAR) and contributed to the feminist magazine *Spare Rib*.

The writing in *JOLT* was initially by hand, a mode that reinforced the first-take immediacy of punk fanzine creation. Indeed, the inaugural issue made clear that it was 'a period piece written in January 1977', locating the fanzine in a particular time and place.[29] Whitman personalised and demystified the process of production. She said that the idea for the fanzine came to her in bed following the removal of her wisdom teeth. Her thoughts on punk and fascism were formed, in part, by meeting a '"punk" at a party' who wore a swastika and believed in repatriation and national service. She also reported on a meeting organised by the International Marxist Group about fascism and the mass media, during which her shyness stopped her challenging the folk singer Leon Rosselson over his ignorance of punk.[30] The impression, taken from a reading of all three issues, is of a politics coming into focus as the reader follows Whitman's thought processes across various interactions, experiences and events. With each issue, her resolve hardens and her political position clarifies.

As befits an archetypal punk fanzine, the text of *JOLT* was surround by images and excerpts stripped from newspapers, books and the music press: quotes from female punks, reports on the NF, passages from Andy Warhol's would-be executioner Valerie Solanas's Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) manifesto, even pictures of bodies from the Nazi death camps. Whitman also enrolled her friends and family to contribute, with the striking illustration of morality campaigner Mary Whitehouse entwined in a naked lesbian embrace on the cover of issue three being provided by Toothpaste's sister, Ros. Though some early (and later) punk fanzines would prioritise the written word, the genre was largely defined by visuals that contributed to the tone of the discourse or served as evidence for the chosen subject matter.

This was important, as punk's cultural intervention was regularly understood as a dialogue with the media and the wider culture industry.

[28] *JOLT*, 1–3 (1977). [29] *JOLT*, 1 (1977), p. 2. [30] *JOLT*, 1–3 (1977).

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A young punk did not have to be familiar with the arguments of Guy Debord and his fellow situationists to recognise that the media distorted and the promises emblazoned on the advertising hoardings were false. Even so, a fanzine such as *No Future/Tacky* did reveal a familiarity with anarchist and situationist ideas, offering both a comment on and critique of punk's commodification across two fanzines produced as one. Conceived in 1977 by Stephen Lavers, later to write for David Bailey and David Litchfield's *Ritz* newspaper, *Tacky* served as a parody of punk's co-option by the music industry and wider media. Presented like a teen magazine, it highlighted wallposter 'pin-ups' on the front cover and featured a deliberately trite Q&A with band The Damned. The language and layout were mocking, leading to a punk 'fashion' spread and an interview with Vivienne Westwood telling 'her thrilling story'.[31]

In fact, the Westwood interview served as a segue between *Tacky* and *No Future*, which changed in tone dramatically and took a far more critical and confrontational approach to punk's co-option. On the cover, a list of words – 'democracy', 'truth', 'leader', 'politics', 'hero', 'education', 'law', 'nation', 'career' – was presented in bold white-against-black text, beneath which it was revealed that 'all these words are used to brainwash you but don't believe us because we use them too'. Content-wise, following the slogan 'All Media Distort – Think For Yourself', a long typed-up essay on anarchism bemoaned those who followed politics for fashion. Tolstoy was quoted, and the legitimacy (or not) of violence was debated with reference to the Red Army Faction, then at war with the German state. George Orwell's *1984* was again evoked in relation to the media and technology, paving the way for an anarchist solution based on 'FREE CO-OPERATION between individuals'. Read from this direction, the interview with Westwood became a call to arms that propagated punk's intent to 'Trust yourself, don't let anyone tell you what to do and take one little step so you're living instead of following'.[32] Indeed, the form and content of *No Future/Tacky* were crudely but effectively aligned to disseminate its message. Part parody and part communiqué, the working through of its critique was the point and the purpose.

These and similar ideas flowed across punk's fledgling DIY media. One-off fanzines might be dedicated to urging punks to revolt, as with the mainly handwritten *Speak Out!!* that insisted: 'Don't follow fashion, don't follow leaders, create fashion, be you're own leader [*sic*]'.[33] *Brass Lip* was printed through a female co-operative in Birmingham with the

[31] *Tacky/No Future*, 1 (1977). [32] Westwood quoted in *No Future/Tacky*, 1 (1977), n. p.
[33] *Speak Out!!*, 1 (1977).

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purpose of interviewing punk-related female artists about their relationship to the women's movement.[34] Others, such as *Common Knowledge*, committed to explaining and exploring the 'politics of record production', providing detailed instructions on how to make and distribute a record.[35]

In effect, punk's political writing absorbed ideas and issues circulating in the 1970s and 1980s, refracting them through personal experience and relating them to records heard and bands seen. This might entail a brief statement on anti-fascism or support for RAR. It could comprise a collage or a poem. Musings on the dilution of punk's protest through processes of commodification and co-option repeated, with invectives against the media and music industry being commonplace long into the 1980s. But a fanzine's production, both in terms of preparing the paste-up and writing the text, also served as a means of discovery that prompted regular journeys of autodidactic revelation. In *Vague*, Steve Thomas transformed into Tom Vague to travel through a post-punk landscape from where he reported back via lengthy reports on 'boy scout guide[s] to situationism' and book-length editions on left-wing terrorist groups (Angry Brigade; Red Army Faction) and psychogeography.[36] As Thomas became Vague/*Vague*, his writing charted both his own personal evolution and a suitably subterranean history of the late twentieth century.

Re-action: Anarchist Punk Fanzines

Though the politics of punk fanzine writing were contained as much in the doing as the content of communication, the advent of a recognisable 'anarcho-punk' culture inspired by the bands Crass and Poison Girls ensured overtly political discourse became common into the 1980s.[37] As we have seen, the Sex Pistols' infusion of 'anarchy' into pop encouraged early punk fanzines to engage with anarchist notions and beliefs, while socio-political movements such as RAR connected to – and even adopted – punk's text and textures towards broadly leftist or socialist ends.[38] Politics projected onto punk, be it as an expression of 'dole queue

[34] *Brass Lip*, 1 (1977). [35] *Common Knowledge*, 1 (1979).

[36] *Vague*, 16/17 (1985). For a collection, see Tom Vague, *The Great British Mistake: Vague, 1977–92* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1994).

[37] George Berger, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus, 2006); Richard Cross, '"The Hippies Now Wear Black": Crass and the Anarcho-Punk Movement, 1977–84', *Socialist History*, 26 (2004), 25–44.

[38] RAR issued its own punk-informed newssheet *Temporary Hoarding* between 1977 and 1981. See also Matthew Worley, 'Shot by Both Sides: Punk, Politics and the End of

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rock' or a sociological reading of youthful anger, likewise fuelled debate within and around the culture.[39] As a result, early punk fanzines might locate 'The Politics of Punk' in the provision of a way out from the 'school … job … marriage … work … retire' pattern of life (*Ripped & Torn*) or consider whether it was possible to be punk 'posh or poor' (*City Chains*).[40] That punk *meant something* was often stated and felt, though it was rarely explained or defined beyond the crudest terms.

From 1978 to 1979, however, Crass and Poison Girls connected countercultural, feminist and anarchist ideas more fixedly to punk's disaffections. Their 7"-singles and 12"-EPs and albums critiqued social and political power structures, railing against a 'system' maintained primarily by the varied forces of state control and/or socio-cultural norms informed by the residual influence of Christianity. As well as records, both bands issued self-published communiqués and newssheets (*International Anthem*; *The Impossible Dream*). They also provided fanzines with interview time that more often than not led to extensive discussions on politics – personal, global and ideological. In response, a deluge of punk media began to engage with, debate and disseminate Crass' and Poison Girls' ideas, following their example in releasing independent records and working through the possibilities and tensions of anarchist-inspired lifestyles.

In time, many such fanzines began to prioritise politics over music. A classic example, and one of the most startling and renowned of the genre, was *Toxic Grafity*. Produced over 1980 by Mike Diboll, issue 'five' was entitled the 'Mental Liberation Issue' and promised 'A REality OF HORROR [*sic*]'. This, in practice, meant the dismantling – in text and thought – of all the '"pillars of society" [that] support the building of oppression. Remove the pillars and the building will collapse'.[41] The results were extraordinary.

Comprising more than 40 pages, *Toxic Grafity* delved deep into Diboll's psyche. Collages and essays formed the bulk of the content, but there were also cartoons and slogans dotted throughout: 'Beat VAT!!! Steal!!!'. It was the typed text, however, that proved the most distinctive aspect of what Diboll labelled his 'SHITZINE'. Fuelled by speed and alcohol, inspired by Crass and punk's urge to 'question

"Consensus"', *Contemporary British History*, 26:3 (2012), 333–54; Ian Goodyer, *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics of Rock against Racism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

[39] Peter Marsh, 'Dole Queue Rock', *New Society*, 20 January 1977, 112–14; Caroline Coon, 'Sex Pistols: Rotten to the Core', *Melody Maker*, 27 November 1976, 34–35

[40] *Ripped & Torn*, 4 (1977), p. 11; *City Chains*, 2 (1977), p. 10.

[41] *Toxic Grafity*, 5 (1980).

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everything', *Toxic Grafity* delivered a series of relentless diatribes spewed out in seemingly random order. These could be abusive, such as: 'BACK BRITAIN? … FUCK BRITAIN! what ever the excuse these fuckers wanna see us fucking bleed, the kind of moronic "middle class" cretin that reads the lieing Daily "hurrar for the blackshirts" Mail wants his/her silly fucking little head examined, do they think that their "masters" Will spare their boring, trivial existance just because they "backed Britain" [*sic*]'.[42] But they were also often existential and self-reflective: 'stripped of lies and myths, "civilized life" seems unbearably hollow, a façade, a film going on before my eyes, so futile, so absurde, so pointless, i seek … MY EXIT-STANCE [*sic*]'.[43]

The tone was by turns angry, despairing and parodic. Then, in a long two-part essay entitled 'What Price Definitions', Diboll turned against language itself, disavowing 'labels' and social categories to conclude that 'in the initiation of speech the seeds of oppression lie dorment [*sic*]'.[44] By the end, *Toxic Grafity* had descended into abjection and what Diboll called 'dialectical diarrhoea', closing with a list of expletives – 'fucking, garbage, shit, refuse, re-fuse obcene shithole …' – and a cursory 'FUCK OFF'. Having liberated the mind and considered 'syndicalism, anarchism, pacifism and existentialism' as 'different applications of the same, true, beautiful ideal', a 'dark abyss' still awaited: a 'black expance [*sic*]' in which any 'common identity' was shared only 'thru a sweaty, sweaty, smelly arsehole [*sic*]'.[45]

Given that the 'Mental Liberation Issue' of *Toxic Grafity* came with a Crass flexi-disc 7"-single attached, its influence was soon felt. After selling an impressive 20,000 copies, a second edition was produced that fed into the upsurge of anarchist-inspired 'punkzines' appearing into the early 1980s. Though few ventured quite as far as *Toxic Grafity*, many tried and some came close. Lee Gibson's various fanzines – *A Movement With No Name*, *Protesting Children Minus the Bondage*, *Anathema* et al. – initially emerged contemporaneously with Diboll's efforts and similarly explored the depths of inner-space. Again, dense prose across multiple pages depicted desolation and frustration, before an interest in the occult and collaborations with the poet Andy T (Andy Thorley) and the illustrator/artist Kim Baxter suggested some respite. Andy Martin's *Scum*, too, employed a deliberately provocative approach to cajole apathetic punks towards 'free thort and aktion [*sic*]'.[46] By so doing, Martin meshed

[42] Ibid., p. 14. The text refers to the *Daily Mail*'s 1934 article in support for Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists.
[43] Ibid., p. 18. [44] Ibid., p. 38. [45] Ibid., pp. 4, 18, 38 and 42.
[46] *Scum*, 6 (1983).

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class invective with notions of autonomy that read simultaneously inspiring and unhinged.

Patterns emerged. Artworks – primarily collages and illustrations – engaged with recurring themes: war, religion, gender constructs, misogyny and animal rights. These sometimes recalled the art produced by Gee Vaucher and Lance d'Boyle (Gary Robins) for Crass and Poison Girls, respectively, but they also revealed genuinely original talents such as Baxter and *Re-action*'s Cam Smith, who later worked for Marvel Comics and *2000 AD*. A haranguing tone, didactic and scolding, likewise became common, as if anarchist questioning proffered definite answers; catechisms almost: 'marriage is a deed of possession in submission which is perpetuated by socialisation in order to maintain social control and social order'.[47] Equally, the bands featured in anarcho-zines began to repeat, connecting across the emergent culture but also contributing to a sense of uniformity. More interesting for our purposes, then, was how anarcho-punk writing extended the exploratory politics of punk's initial intervention, particularly with regard to understanding the parameters of anarchism.

If, as Crass suggested, anarchy was an alternative to the political binaries of 'left' and 'right', then what did this entail and how could it be applied? To flick through punk's anarcho-zines in the early 1980s is to find an ongoing debate in which ideas were offered, contemplated, adopted and sometimes rejected. A critique of 'the system' was relatively easy to articulate and apply, leading to countless tirades against the government, parliamentary democracy, the military, monarchy, police, religion, the meat industry, vivisection, capitalism, state-directed communism, fascism, media, marriage, law courts, schools and the arms industry. But how to respond? What could or should anarchists do? What did anarchy look like?

The answers varied between the open-ended and the definitive. Usually presented alongside band features and political collage, with addresses for radical bookshops and campaign groups scattered nearby, they typically took the form of short essays that raised questions, considered problems, then proffered a solution. Hundreds were penned across the gamut of punk's fanzine culture, but a few examples should suffice to give a sense of the form.

[47] The quote is from *Antigen*, 1 (1982), p. 2, but see also: on religion, *Fack*, 4 (1980), p. 4; on the media, *Sunday the 7th*, 2 (1981), pp. 10–12; on social conditioning, *Fack*, 5 (1980), p. 21; on sexism, *Fack*, 6 (1981), pp. 6 and 19; on Crass' critique of Rock Against Racism, *New Crimes*, 4 (1981), pp. 10–11; on the family, *Precautions Essentielles Pour La Bonne*, 1 (1981), p. 9.

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Matt Macleod's 1981 essay for *Enigma* began by recognising how human actions were always controlled 'to some degree' by morality. Even oppression was typically justified in moral terms, he argued. These, in turn, were informed principally by religion and, 'in the western capitalist world', Christianity. 'The values and lifestyles of this system also have their roots in the doctrines of this fiendish cult', he continued, locating sexual repression and gender stereotypes as a product of the church. By the same token, a faith in political 'dogma' served also as a block on freedom, meaning anarchism must never be reduced to 'a distinct code of ethics'. Rather, any revolution needed to be a revolution 'in the way we think and feel'. Only then would the 'natural order of anarchy' be realised.[48]

For Karin, writing in the more general punkzine *Trees and Flowers*, the question was a practical one: 'could the anarchy theory ever work'? She began with a definition: 'Free co-operation amongst individuals.' And yet most people saw anarchy as chaotic and violent; the antithesis of a peaceful and free society. A contradiction? No, she mused, because violence stemmed from power, the processes of which we are conditioned to accept from birth. In fact, she continued, disaffection was born of capitalist relations: people working for other people and the family serving as a 'unit only of consumption not production'. Stuck in 'boring jobs' or working 'for a pittance', people lived for money. But how to change? The political structures in Britain were too entrenched to 'just dissolve', Karin reasoned: 'As the system becomes more complex the individual becomes less free'. Violent revolution was not the answer, tending only to replace one repressive system with another. People had to escape the system through 'choice', she concluded, alluding to punk, anarchy and peace as the means to escape the 'rules [that] control their lives'.[49]

Anarchy and peace conformed to Crass' pacifism and support for CND. Not all young punks adhered, however, ensuring fanzines offered space to initiate discussions that no doubt repeated around various pubs, clubs, squats and bedsits across the country. Indeed, the first two issues of *Kill Your Pet Puppy*, one of the most well-known and widely read punk fanzines of the 1980s, were in large part dedicated to the question of anarchy's relationship to violence. Occasioned by the disruption of a recent Crass and Poison Girls gig, whereat assorted anti-fascists and Socialist Worker Party-aligned 'squadists' did battle with British Movement neo-Nazis, the ensuing debate saw both bands condemn the

[48] 'These are the right morals …', *Enigma*, 4 (1982), p. 4.
[49] 'Could the anarchy theory ever work [?]', *Trees and Flowers*, 4 (1981), p. 5.

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violence on either side. In reply, members of – and those close to – the 'Puppy Collective' offered varied responses, loosely concluding that 'violent anarchy must fail' but that 'Violent Actions in the name and cause of Anarchy are essential [*sic*]'.[50]

As this suggests, at least some young punks began to transform their ideas into a politics that pushed beyond the parameters outlined in Crass' and the Poison Girls' early records and interviews. Taken to an extreme, this led to fanzines such as Ian Rawes' *Pigs for Slaughter* committing to direct action and the instigation of a short-lived Anarchist Youth Federation (AYF) that claimed small pockets of support across the UK.[51]

Pigs for Slaughter declared itself a 'practical paper for the militant anarchist punk'. Started in 1981, it offered guides to graffiti and more combative forms of 'anarchy and rage'. There 'comes a point', the pilot issue insisted, when 'all our fine ideas have to be backed up with direct, militant action'.[52] This, in practice, meant reporting on statist or ruling-class modes of control – tear gas, the Special Patrol Group (SPG), the Economic League[53] – and encouraging acts of resistance such as establishing anarchy centres, making petrol bombs and initiating sticker campaigns to blitz London's tube trains.[54] The AYF even extolled carrying out acts of vandalism on banks and 'expensive cars', while at least one shop accused of exploiting punk fashion, BOY on the King's Road, survived a failed firebombing.[55]

Interestingly, the pilot issue included a rather awkward interview with Crass, during which competing conceptions of anarchy were discussed.[56] More typically, Rawes expressed his frustration with punk and punk-related anarchism through typed essays that concluded Britain and Europe were entering a 'new feudal age'. Soon, he reasoned, 'society will be made up of the very rich + very poor [*sic*]'. The state would serve to enforce this, meaning 'subversives + activists [*sic*]' needed to resort to force 'when absolutely necessary'.[57] Clearly, making music and issuing statements were no longer enough. 'Music will never succeed in

[50] *Kill Your Pet Puppy*, 2 (1980), pp. 4–5.
[51] *Pigs for Slaughter*, 3 (1982). For a stinging critique of the Anarchist Youth Federation's politics, see *New Crimes*, 7 (1983), pp. 7–10.
[52] *Pigs for Slaughter*, pilot issue (1981), pp. 1–2.
[53] The Special Patrol Group was the Greater London Metropolitan Police's mobile response unit; the Economic League was a pressure group committed to resisting (left-wing) challenges to free enterprise.
[54] *Pigs for Slaughter*, pilot–3 (1981–82).
[55] *Pigs for Slaughter*, 3 (1982). A fake letter bomb was also reputedly sent to The Alien in Bolton.
[56] *Pigs for Slaughter*, pilot issue (1981). [57] *Pigs for Slaughter*, 2 (1981).

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changing society', Rawes concluded: 'the only language politicians understand is that of Molotovs + burning police cars [*sic*]'.[58]

Such disappointment at the limitations of punk and the ineffectiveness of cultural revolt became a common trope of punk fanzine writing. Among anarchist milieus, therefore, activism and support for various campaigns were an obvious next step, aligning young punks to women's groups, the peace movement and, increasingly, animal rights. But it was in the fanzines that arguments were first rehearsed. Positions might shift and evolve over time. The eager and earnest demands of youth might soon give way to more sober rationale. Nevertheless, the questions had been asked and the imagination piqued. Punk fanzines, through their practice and critiques, opened the way for formative political expression and debate.

Ability Stinks: Conclusions

If anarchy infused a particular stream of punk culture, then an array of politics found expression across the range of punk and punk-informed fanzines disseminated over the 1970s, 1980s and beyond. Overtly socialist fanzines in the 1980s covered bands such as Redskins and provided a medium for 'ranter' poets to vent their spleen against racism, sexism and the policies of Margaret Thatcher.[59] Far-right punk bands gradually emerged, bringing with them swastika-daubed pages featuring the likes of Skrewdriver and eventually paving the way for the globally distributed *Blood & Honour* magazine.[60] Feminist content had been evident in punk-related fanzines from at least early 1977 and, by the 1990s, informed a riot grrrl culture defined as much by zines as by music.[61] More usually, perhaps, 'think-pieces' might only occasionally permeate the dominant music coverage of a typical fanzine, reflecting on anything from education to the miners' strike of 1984–85. Interview questions, too, sometimes drifted from 'best gig' and record news to enquiries on a band's politics and opinion. Then again, a wholesale rejection of politics was not uncommon, usually on the grounds of divisiveness or tedium (which, paradoxically, was itself an inherently political response). But whatever ideological direction was signalled, the approach remained broadly the same: relatively short statements caught somewhere between the

[58] *Why Punk Is a Total Failure*, leaflet circa 1982.
[59] See titles such as *Molotov Comics* and *Tiranë Thrash* and *Wake Up*.
[60] See, for example, *The Truth at Last*, produced by Paul Burnley of the band No Remorse.
[61] Rebekah J. Buchanan, *Writing a Riot: Riot Grrrl Zines and Feminist Rhetorics* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018); Lisa Darm (ed.), *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York: CUNY, 2013)

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inquisitive and definitive, recognising problems and searching subjectively for solutions.

As this suggests, and like the music they covered, punk and punk-related fanzines could be innovative and formulaic, provocative and crude, exciting and dull, insightful and stupid. Yet they all served as a medium – a cultural and political space – where opinion was aired and ideas tested. For Lucy Robinson, in an influential essay moving from 'the history of zines' towards 'zines as history', fanzines not only allowed young people to formulate their own politics, but also to construct alternative canons and disrupt dominant narratives. Be it 'riot grrrls looking for inspiration from suffragettes, or anarcho-punks learning the lessons from a previous generation's activists, or queer activists building community memorials', zines proposed competing genealogies and the possibility of new historical interpretations. Fanzines offered – and continue to offer – a way of 'writing identities into formation', Robinson argues, drawing attention to their reflexive discussion and multiple lines of enquiry.[62]

Ultimately, as a genre of political writing, punk fanzines enabled young people to communicate what and how they liked. Paul's *Suburban Revolt* began from a blank sheet of paper, conveying no formal rules or restrictions as to what could be covered or expressed. Constraints were imposed only by knowledge, imagination and, to an obvious extent, the finance to produce and distribute more than a limited number of copies. As a result, the politics of punk fanzine writing and creation lay as much in facilitating as in formulating arguments and opinions. In general terms, they provided a means of expression and served as hubs in cultural and political networks. They also allowed for future writers, illustrators and political activists to learn and develop their craft and ideas. Punk fanzine writing was formative and generally unresolved; it comprised a genre where politics began to gestate and offer a glimpse of youthful psyches striving to make sense of the world.

[62] Lucy Robinson, 'Zines and History: Zines as History', in Subcultures Network (ed.), *Ripped, Torn and Cut: Pop, Politics and Punk Fanzines from 1976* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), pp. 39–54.

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