
‘I Wanna See Some History’:

Recent Writing on British

Punk

Forum: Alternative Musical Geographies: Popular Music and Space in Post-War German History

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- Viv Albertine, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes, Music, Music, Music, Boys, Boys, Boys* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015) 432 pp. (pb), £8.99 ISBN 978-0-5713-2828-4.
- Nick Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015) 288 pp. (pb), £17.99, ISBN 978-0-7190-8865-0.
- Pete Dale, *Anyone Can Do It: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground* (London: Routledge, 2012) 256 pp. (hb), £95, ISBN 978-1-4094-4432-9.

Tucked away on the b-side of the Sex Pistols’ third single, ‘Pretty Vacant’ (1977), is a cover version of The Stooges’ ‘No Fun’. The song had long been a staple of the Pistols’ live set; on record, however, Johnny Rotten chose to open the track with a diatribe against those attempting to imbue the punk culture he helped instigate with broader socio-economic, cultural or political implications. ‘Here we go now’, he snarled, ‘a sociology lecture, with a bit of psychology, a bit of neurology, a bit of fuckology’.¹

The target of Rotten’s ire was the tendency of journalists such as Caroline Coon to underpin punk’s anger with reference to the desperate economic circumstances of the mid-1970s. It was only ‘natural’, Coon had suggested, that a group of ‘deprived London street kids’ such as the Sex Pistols would produce music ‘with a startlingly anti-establishment bias’.² But if Rotten was not so sure, then academics, journalists and political commenters have – perhaps predictably – tended to side with Coon. Almost from the moment British punk was ‘named’ in 1976, it was interpreted as a key moment in, or example of, the intersection of political resistance and popular culture.

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¹ Sex Pistols, ‘No Fun’, in *Pretty Vacant* (Virgin VS 184, 1977), b-side.

² Caroline Coon, ‘Sex Pistols: Rotten to the Core’, *Melody Maker*, 27 Nov. 1976, 34–5.

To read back over contemporary political journals, analytical press reviews and even tabloid exposés is to find ruminations on punk's cultural and political meaning or intent.

Given this, it is surprising to find that punk – and youth culture more generally – has been largely ignored by historians. There are many reasons for this. Some lie in the prejudices of the profession, others in the theoretical and empirical problems entailed in writing such histories. Punk made a lot of noise, but its historical traces lie scattered across the memories and personal archives of individual actors and fans. Moreover, the grander claims for punk's significance have typically found expression in the music press – a medium not known to lend itself to academic rigour. But whatever the explanation, punk's history remains buried in the depths of its cultural produce (records, fanzines, posters, artworks, films) and the minutiae of journalistic overviews, its meanings blurred across the moving terrain of continued sociological study. In this review article, we identify the ways in which punk's history has so far been presented and assess three recent contributions. We also suggest how in the future punk's history might be researched and written.

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Taken broadly, reflective writing on punk has tended to comprise three forms: the first (auto)biographical, with personal testimony supplying historical authority, the second popular historical, wherein a narrative of cultural development is told (sometimes with reference to contemporaneous social, political and economic events) and the third socio-cultural, in which scholars from cultural studies, sociology and cognate disciplines have sought to frame punk's history within some overarching account of the interplay of culture and change.

The first of these, autobiography/biography, may be usefully tied to a tendency evident within punk's early stirrings. That is, those involved quickly moved to collate, construct and protect their own emergent histories. Thus, the Sex Pistols recruited a designer (Jamie Reid), photographer (Ray Stevenson, then Dennis Morris) and film-maker (Julien Temple) to document the band's progress, the culmination of which was the quasi-Situationist fantasy of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980), a filmic attempt by Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistols' manager/Svengali, to claim the Pistols' myth as his own. But if *Swindle* remains a potent example of why those who make history should not thereby be trusted to write it, then its initial starting point remains significant: to secure control of the group's presentation and to set it against and in contrast to the distorting lens of the media and the all-too-familiar contrivances of the music industry.

Crucially, too, punk's audience was also motivated to document the culture from the bottom-up. Fanzines such as *Sniffin' Glue* were designed to provide an alternative to a weekly music press deemed 'so far away from the kids that they can't possibly say

anything of importance'.³ Film-makers, including Temple, Don Letts and Wolfgang Büld, captured punk's grass-roots development in stark documentary form.⁴ The first punk books were almost all photographic collections or compiled press-cuttings culled from newspapers and fanzines.⁵ As a result, punk's historiography has been defined by a predominance of autobiography, oral testimony, ephemera collections and pictorial representation.⁶

Such accounts remain informative and entertaining. Over time, as new angles are sought and punk's battlelines fade into the past, so they continue to throw up choice bits of detail to tickle the punk connoisseur and shed light on events lost in previous accounts. At the same time, the transition from contemporary cultural critique to artefact has arguably served to blunt the tensions, innovations and contradictions so resonant of punk. More generally, the relativism of memoir, biography and most oral testimony has precluded analytical consideration of punk's broader cultural significance. The complexities of punk culture are denied in favour of subjectivist accounts that too often fall back on apocryphal stories and the nostalgic hue that

³ Mark Perry, 'Editorial', *Sniffin' Glue*, 1 (1976), 2. For an overview of punk fanzines, see Matthew Worley, 'Punk, Politics and British (fan)zines, 1976–84: "While the world was dying, did you wonder why?"', *History Workshop Journal*, 79 (2015), 76–106.

⁴ *Sex Pistols No. 1*, Julien Temple, dir. (1977), film; *Punk in London*, Wolfgang Büld, dir. (1977), film; *The Punk Rock Movie*, Don Letts, dir. (1978), film.

⁵ Isabelle Anscombe and Dike Blair, *Punk: Rock/Style/Stance/People/Start That Head the New Wave in England and America* (New York: Urizen Books, 1978); Virginia Boston, *Punk Rock* (London: Plexus, 1978); Julie Davis, ed., *Punk* (London: Millington, 1977); Val Hennessey, *In the Gutter* (London: Quartet, 1978); Ray Stevenson, *Sex Pistols Scrap Book* (London: Self-published, 1977 [reissued as *Sex Pistols File*, London: Omnibus Press, 1978]); John Tobler, *Punk Rock* (London: Phebus, 1977); Michael Dempsey, *100 Nights at The Roxy*, (London: Big O, 1978).

⁶ For just one example of the countless photo books, see Dennis Morris, *Rebel Rock: A Photographic History of the Sex Pistols* (London: Omnibus Press, 1985). For oral histories see Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (London: Abacus, 1997); Nils Stevenson and Ray Stevenson, *Vacant: A Diary of the Punk Years, 1976–79* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999); Stephen Colegrave and Chris Sullivan, *Punk: A Life Apart* (London: Cassell & Co., 2001); John Robb, *Punk Rock: An Oral History* (London: Ebury Press, 2006); David Nolan, *I Swear I Was There: The Gig That Changed the World* (Church Stretton: IMP, 2006); Paul Marko, *The Roxy London WC2: A Punk Rock History* (London: Punk77 Books, 2007); Simon Reynolds, *Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009); Jon Savage, *The England's Dreaming Tapes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009); Gregory Bull and Mike Dines, eds., *Tales from the Punkside* (Northampton: Itchy Monkey Press, 2014). For collections of photos or punk ephemera, see Simon Easton, *Sex and Seditonaries* (London: PunkPistol, 2007); Simon Barker, *Punk's Dead* (London: Divus, 2011); Johan Kugelberg and Jon Savage, eds., *Punk: An Aesthetic* (New York: Rizzoli, 2012); Russ Bestley and Alex Ogg, *The Art of Punk* (London: Omnibus Press, 2012); Jon Savage, *Punk 45: Original Punk Rock Singles Cover Art* (London: Soul Jazz, 2013). There are now several autobiographies, including John Lydon, *Anger is an Energy: My Life Uncensored* (London: Pimlico, 2014); John Lydon, Keith Zimmerman and Kent Zimmerman, *Rotten: No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs* (London: Plexus, 1994); Glen Matlock, *I Was a Teenage Sex Pistol*, 2006 edn (London: Reynolds & Hearn, 2006 [1990]); Jah Wobble, *Memoirs of a Geezer* (London: Serpent's Tail, 2009); Jeff Turner with Garry Bushell, *Cockney Reject* (London: John Blake, 2010); Steve Ignorant and Steve Pottinger, *The Rest is Propaganda* (London: Southern, 2010); Penny Rimbaud, *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1998); Adam Ant, *Stand and Deliver: The Autobiography* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2006); Julian Cope, *Head On: Memories of the Liverpool Punk Scene and the Story of The Teardrop Explodes, 1976–82* (London: Thorsons, 1999 edition); Vivienne Westwood and Ian Kelly, *Vivienne Westwood* (London: Picador, 2014).

continues to surround 1976–77. It is rare to find, for example, consideration of how the complex interplay of personnel, venues, resources and sensibilities came together to ‘make’ punk, or how it gave form to, in Raymond Williams’ words, the ‘structures of feeling’ that the cultural moment embodied.⁷

A recent and notable exception to this is the memoir of Viv Albertine: guitarist, key songwriter, strategist and sometime manager of the first all-female punk band The Slits.⁸ *Clothes . . . Music . . . Boys . . .* (2012), despite its unwieldy title (the extent of the teenage Albertine’s interests as summarised by her irate mother), is brilliantly written. Funny, moving, insightful and formally innovative, the book is also preoccupied to an often uncomfortable and somehow very ‘punk’ degree with honesty. This concern with ‘(genital) warts ‘n’ all’, as Albertine amusingly describes it, offers access to punk as a history from below, giving substance to its structures of feeling. One specific aspect of this is sexuality. In its matter-of-fact accounts of the author’s relationships and carnal experiences, the book offers a fascinating window into the neglected topic of punk’s sexual politics.⁹

Punk’s role as a formative youth culture, impacting powerfully upon identity, is richly served. Albertine brings to bear a carefully considered perspective on how punk affected her outlook on life, demonstrating its lasting effect and therefore contemporary relevance. A key instance of this is the fact that punk became the framework for Albertine’s re-invention of herself in later life as her marriage began to break up: after years of no longer playing the guitar, she re-taught herself and began to write new songs, putting herself through a second baptism of fire by performing them at local open-mic nights.

The book’s main focus, on Albertine’s experience, reasserts the subjective nature of memory. ‘Let others who were there tell their versions if they want to. This is mine’, she asserts early on.¹⁰ The text is unusual, however, in the extent to which it historicises this experience. *Clothes . . . Music . . . Boys . . .* reveals that, as was the case for many punks, Albertine’s countercultural pre-history in 1960s protest, illicit trips to Amsterdam, art school and the mid-1970s pub rock scene was a significant influence on her punk years. Rather than sweeping statements equating her own perspective to that of punk in general, Albertine is both aware of differences within its ranks (class and education) and their consequences, noting, for example, the initial gap in life experience – in terms of age and background – between herself and Slits’ singer Ari Up. Albertine understands that there were different tendencies of punk, which she describes as proto-Thatcherite ‘nihilists and careerists’ on the one hand versus those with ‘ideas’ on the other.¹¹ This, of course, is an oversimplification,

⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸ Viv Albertine, *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes, Music, Music, Music, Boys, Boys, Boys* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

⁹ To date, academic analyses of this theme have largely framed it in theoretical terms, offering little in the way of historical reference. See, however, David Wilkinson, ‘Ever Fallen In Love With Someone You Shouldn’t Have?: Punk, Politics and Same-Sex Passion’, *Keywords*, 13 (2015), 57–76.

¹⁰ Albertine, *Clothes*, ix.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 241.

but her inclusion of 'careerists' avoids any pretence at defining the 'real punk'. Not dissimilarly, the book also offers a nuanced perspective on The Slits and feminism, revealing a band whose understandings of gender and relationship to women's rights were more complicated and internally conflicted than has so far been acknowledged. Albertine, for example, recalls an instance in which she claims that the rest of The Slits disapproved of her choice of stage outfit, seeing it as contradicting her feminist politics, whereas for her it was an act of subversive reclamation.

Despite its many qualities, Albertine's book has clear limits as an historical source. As with most memoir and autobiography, the scenes presented in *Clothes . . . Music . . . Boys . . .* read as though they have been tidied up both narratively speaking and in terms of the meaning attached to them. This is not a criticism. Any written account that did not impose some kind of retrospective coherence on memory would be very disjointed. And it should be noted that Albertine's book reads convincingly in comparison with many other 'punk memoirs': the vagaries and alleged libels and plagiarisms of Dame Vivienne Westwood's recent account being a case in point.¹² Nevertheless, the 'problem' of subjectivity remains, even as Albertine recognises and avoids the trap of universalising her own personal experience.

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Punk's tendency to prioritise the personalised narrative bleeds into most popular historical accounts of punk, not least John Robb's engaging but disparate *Oral History of Punk* (2001). Indeed, narrative accounts of punk have begun to multiply as individual memoirs, group biographies and popular music histories find publication.¹³ Some of these are excellent. Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming* (1991) will forever remain the definitive study of the Sex Pistols' rise and fall, locating the band firmly within the cultural, socio-economic and political context of the mid-1970s. Simon Reynolds, too, has catalogued punk's experimental diaspora in his *Rip it Up and Start Again*

¹² Adam Sherwin, 'Vivienne Westwood Accused of Plagiarism Over Book on Her Life', *The Independent*, 16 Oct. 2014, available online at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/vivienne-westwood-accused-of-plagiarism-over-book-on-her-life-9799821.html> (last visited 19 Jan. 2015).

¹³ General histories would include Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991); Simon Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again: Post-Punk, 1978–84* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005); Clinton Heylin, *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge* (London: Penguin, 2007); Phil Strongman, *Pretty Vacant: A History of Punk* (London: Orion Books, 2007). Key band histories include Pat Gilbert, *Passion is a Fashion: The Real Story of The Clash* (London: Auram Press, 2009 edition); Marcus Grey, *The Clash: Return of the Last Gang in Town* (London: Helter Skelter, 2001); Simon Ford, *Hip Priest: The Story of Mark E Smith and The Fall* (London: Quartet Books, 2003); Mick Middles and Mark E. Smith, *The Fall* (London: Omnibus Press, 2008 edition); Roland Kirk, *Kicking Up a Racket: The Story of Stiff Little Fingers, 1977–1983* (Belfast: Appletree Press, 2009); David Buckley, *No Mercy: The Authorised and Uncensored Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1997); Simon Ford, *Wreckers of Civilization: The Story of COUM Transmissions and Throbbing Gristle* (London: Black Dog, 1999). Among the various biographies, Chris Salewicz, *Redemption Song: The Definitive Biography of Joe Strummer* (London: Harper Collins, 2006); Mick Middles and Lindsey Reade, *Torn Apart: The Life of Ian Curtis* (London: Omnibus Press, 2006).

(2005), which journeys through the various ‘post-punk’ scenes that emerged in the Pistols’ wake. In so doing, Reynolds argues that ‘revolutionary movements in pop culture have their widest impact after the “moment” has allegedly passed, when ideas spread from the metropolitan bohemian elites and hipster cliques that originally “own” them, and reach the suburbs and the regions’. That such ideas were often ‘inextricably connected to the political and social turbulence of the times’ is made clear as Reynolds celebrates the musical innovations and intellectual engagement of artists who ‘exposed and dramatised the mechanisms of power in everyday life’ while simultaneously committing to an ethos of ‘perpetual change’.¹⁴

More typically, narrative accounts of punk serve to absorb it into an ever-more uniform continuum of a popular music history that is close to saturation point. With a multitude of monthly music magazines (*Mojo*, *Q*, *Uncut*, *Vive Le Rock*) dedicated to rock’s past and countless documentaries (see the recent BBC4 *Punk Britannia*, Don Letts’ *Attitude* (2005) and various DVD histories of The Clash, Joy Division, Sex Pistols and Sid Vicious) regurgitating well-worn legends *ad infinitum*, so punk’s innovators and innovations become dislocated from – or only superficially related to – their historical context. In effect, the commodification that occurred in response to punk’s original challenge is reinforced as pop heritage, with punk ‘hits’ incorporated into ‘best of’ lists and reissues and choice cuts incorporated into state-sanctioned cultural showcases (the Olympic ceremony, gallery exhibitions of punk sleeve designs, etc.). In other words, the honed narrative breeds familiarity, smooths the edges, excludes the uncomfortable and reduces punk to but another touchstone in pop’s rich tapestry, a distinct *musical* segue between the 1970s and 1980s.

Alternative readings do exist. Greil Marcus, Stewart Home and Tom Vague have – to different degrees – argued for punk’s place in a ‘secret history’ of dissent that passes back through Situationist interventions, Lettrisme and Dada to even the ‘King Mob’ outrages of the 1780 Gordon Riots.¹⁵ Polemical essays have also sought to contest or undermine perceived wisdom as to punk’s motives, meaning and import.¹⁶ But even these rely on a choice interpretation of punk that selects what is deemed relevant to the argument and discards what is not. And if the anarcho-punk movement inspired by Crass and the DIY ethos embodied in the independent labels that flowered around punk have recently begun to be accorded greater interest, then other areas of punk’s

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again*, xvii–xxxii.

¹⁵ Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989); Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War* (Stirling: AK Press, 1991); Tom Vague, *King Mob Echo: From Gordon Riots to Situationists and Sex Pistols* (London: Dark Star, 2000). See also Vague’s *Vague* fanzine, a selection of which is compiled in Tom Vague, *The Great British Mistake: Vague, 1977–92*, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Julie Burchill and Tony Parsons, *The Boy Looked at Johnny: The Obituary of Rock and Roll* (London: Pluto Press, 1978); David Wise and Stuart Wise, ‘The End of Music’, in Stewart Home, ed., *What is Situationism? A Reader* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 1996). Originally entitled ‘Punk, Reggae; A Critique’, this last was first published as a pamphlet in 1978 and circulated among anarchist groups in Leeds. See also Garry Johnson, *The Story of Oi!: A View from the Dead End of the Street* (Manchester: Babylon Books, 1982); Stewart Home, *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory and Punk Rock* (Hove: Codex, 1995).

dissemination have yet to be judged worthy of serious comment.¹⁷ Punk's early 1980s resurgence, for example, not to mention the provincial scenes or those around Oi! and positive punk remain beyond the pervasive narrative of popular music's 'progression'.¹⁸ Too often, it seems, punk's broader culture – its audience, context, language and politics – is lost beneath the minutiae of who played bass for whom and inventories of gig dates or record releases.

Yet the existence of alternative narratives, and the potential for further exploration, suggests the historian has important work to do. They allow opportunity to make better sense of punk's origins, complexities, contradictions and contested forms. They enable a challenge to the popular historical accounts that may well represent the obsessions and imaginings of their authors, but lose sight of the evidence and the wider context. More crucially, they hint toward a need to identify the empirical basis upon which any theoretical framework may help link processes and forms of cultural practice and production to social and political change.

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Punk's meaning and wider significance once formed the crux of much contemporary analysis of British youth culture, not only in the music press but also in political periodicals and sections of the academy. Indeed, there is a neat if not altogether coincidental link to be made between the emergence of the Sex Pistols and the flourishing of the Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). Under Stuart Hall's leadership the CCCS developed a theoretical framework that explained youth culture as a form of 'resistance'. The CCCS provided a focus for those – particularly, but not exclusively, within the social sciences and the nascent discipline of cultural studies – who saw popular culture as irreducibly political.¹⁹ Punk

¹⁷ For Crass and anarcho-punk, see George Berger, *The Story of Crass* (London: Omnibus Press, 2006); Brian Cogan, "Do They Owe Us a Living? Of Course They Do!" Crass, Throbbing Gristle, and Anarchy and Radicalism in early English Punk Rock', *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 1, 2 (2007), 77–90; Richard Cross, 'The Hippies Now Wear Black: Crass and the Anarcho-Punk Movement, 1977–84', *Socialist History*, 26 (2004), 25–44; Ian Glasper, *The Day the Country Died: A History of Anarcho Punk, 1980–1984* (London: Cherry Red, 2006); George McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Currents of Resistance since the Sixties* (London: Verso, 1996). For independent labels and DIY, see David Hesmondhalgh, 'Post-Punk's Attempt to Democratise the Music Industry: the Success and Failure of Rough Trade', *Popular Music*, 16, 3 (1998), 25–74; Rob Young, *Rough Trade* (London: Black Dog, 2006); Alex Ogg, *Independence Days: The Story of UK Independent Record Labels* (London: Cherry Red, 2009); Neil Taylor, *Document and Eyewitness: An Intimate History of Rough Trade* (London: Orion Books, 2010); James Nice, *Shadowplayers: The Rise and Fall of Factory Records* (London: Auram, 2010); Richard King, *How Soon is Now: The Madmen and Mavericks Who Made Independent Music, 1975–2005* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012).

¹⁸ A few exceptions would include Richard Eddington, *Sent from Coventry: The Chequered Past of Tivo Tone* (London: IMP, 2004); Dave Thompson, *Wheels Out of Gear: 2 Tone, The Specials and a World on Fire* (London: Helter Skelter, 2004). See also Ian Glasper's work (cited previously) and John Robb, *Death to Trad Rock* (London: Cherry Red, 2009), all of which serve as dictionaries of bands and labels relating to punk scenes not typically covered in mainstream histories of British music.

¹⁹ Most, too, look at punk as part of a broader overview of youth culture or popular music. See, for example, Mike Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subculture* (London: Routledge & Kegan

was an obvious object of attention, whether as a semiotic assault on conventional codes of meaning (Hebdige), a paradoxical challenge to the music industry (Laing) or the apotheosis of an art school tradition that sought to marry 'bohemian ideals of authenticity' with 'Pop Art ideals of artifice' at the interface between modernism and postmodernism (Frith).²⁰ In their wake, many of the assumptions first made about punk – its working-class origins, political affinity and subversive intent – have been held up to scrutiny and found wanting.²¹

More recently, it is punk's *legacies* that have drawn attention.²² Politically, both Rock Against Racism (1976–81) and, less systematically, the 'white noise' movement aligned to the far right have provided a means to assess punk's cultural politics in a period of acute social tension.²³ Equally crucially, the primary role played by women in punk scenes locally and nationally continues to warrant attention.²⁴ These

Paul, 1980); Ellis Cashmore, *No Future: Youth and Society* (London: Heinemann, 1984); Iain Chambers, *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1985); Simon Frith, *Sound Affects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981). For the 'politics of pop', see John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); *idem*, *Music and Politics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012). The best historical account of British youth culture remains Bill Osgerby, *Youth in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

²⁰ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 2007 edn (London: Routledge, 2007 [London: Methuen, 1979]); Dave Laing, *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985); Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London: Methuen & Co., 1987). See also, Tricia Henry, *Break All Rules: Punk Rock and the Making of a Style* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989); Neil Nehring, *Flowers in the Dustbin: Culture, Anarchy and Postwar England* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); R. H. Tillman, 'Punk Rock and the Construction of "Pseudo-Political" Movements', *Popular Music and Society*, 7, 3 (1980), 165–75. For a more recent discussion of punk and postmodernism, see Ryan R. Moore, 'Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction', *The Communication Review*, 7 (2004), 305–27.

²¹ See, for example, Andy Bennett, 'Subcultures or neo-tribes? Re-thinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste', *Sociology*, 33, 3 (1999), 599–617; Angela McRobbie, 'Settling Accounts with Subcultures', *Screen*, 39 (1980), 37–49; Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

²² For a collection of essays looking specifically at punk's cultural legacy, see Roger Sabin, ed., *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (London: Routledge, 1999).

²³ Ian Goodyer, *Crisis Music: The Cultural Politics of Rock Against Racism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); Dave Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League, 1977–81* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2006); David Widgery, *Beating Time: Riot 'n' Race 'n' Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1986); Ryan Shaffer, 'The Soundtrack of Neo-Fascism: Youth and Music in the National Front', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 47, 4–5 (2013), 458–82; Timothy S. Brown, 'Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and "Nazi Rock" in England and Germany', *Journal of Social History*, 38, 1 (2004), 157–78; John Cotter, 'Sounds of Hate: White Power Rock and Roll and the Neo-Nazi Skinhead Subculture', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11, 2 (1999), 111–40; Nick Lowles, *White Riot: The Violent Story of Combat 18* (London: Milo, 2001). See also, for a compendium of texts on punk and race, Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, eds., *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London: Verso, 2011). For a rather different take on the question of identity, see Ruth Adams, 'The Englishness of English Punk: Sex Pistols, Subcultures, and Nostalgia', *Popular Music and Society*, 31, 4 (2008), 468–88.

²⁴ Helen Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Sarah Whiteley, *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender* (London: Routledge, 2005); Maria Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004); Caroline O'Meara, 'The Raincoats: Breaking Down Punk Rock's Masculinities', *Popular Music*,

approaches to punk have been less interested in it as historical narrative – either as artefact or conduit of social change – but rather in terms of how it operated as a scene or social form. Arguably, however, such return visits have neglected the socio-economic or class-context of punk's formation and development, an oversight that is addressed in one of the more recent studies considered here.²⁵

Pete Dale's *Anyone Can Do It* (2012) focuses on the tensions between a Marxist and anarchist reading of punk as a way of exploring the music's continuing reinvention and claims to empowerment.²⁶ Dale's study occupies a very different genre to Albertine's *Clothes . . . Music . . . Boys . . .* and therefore has different objectives. It is comparable, however, in the way that it balances personal investment in punk²⁷ with real insight into it as a broader phenomenon. The former gives weight to Dale's arguments and allows for structural innovation that livens up the usual academic monograph format. In between theoretical excursions and in-depth analyses, there are 'interludes' consisting of reflections from the author's past with the intention of shedding experiential light on the surrounding sections. Like Albertine's arrangement of her book as if it were a vinyl record, with a 'Side One' and a 'Side Two', there is something pleasingly punk about such disregard for convention.

In terms of history, *Anyone Can Do It* treats punk as an established tradition with an afterlife extending to very recent times. As such, it offers a positive contrast to the kind of partisan defences and selective argumentation highlighted earlier. In particular, the book's treatment of two subcultures and forms of musical production from the 1990s (Riot Grrrl and Math Rock) as punk is refreshing in the face of the persistent tendency in personal testimonies to pull rank by insisting that the movement was over, its purity compromised, within the first year/six months/whenever the author ceased to be involved, etc.

In contrast to personal testimony and popular historical narratives, Dale's study is theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous, mediating between close readings of songs and historical, social, political and philosophical themes. While many academic studies of popular music and subculture tend to fall on one or the other side of this divide, Dale offers an interdisciplinary approach to punk that brings together history, politics and cultural studies to attempt what Raymond Williams might have called a 'fully elaborated account of cultural process'.²⁸ The book is commendably ambitious in its thematic range; alongside its explorations of socialism,

22, 3 (2003), 299–313; Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Penguin, 1995), ch. 5. See also *She's a Punk Rocker UK*, directed by Zillah Minx (2010).

²⁵ For a rare article on punk and class, see David Simonelli, 'Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976–78', *Contemporary British History*, 16, 2 (2002), 121–44.

²⁶ Pete Dale, *Anyone Can Do It: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground* (London: Routledge, 2012).

²⁷ In the 1990s, Dale co-ran post-punk and riot-grrrl indie label Slampt and participated in various associated bands including Milky Wimpshake.

²⁸ Andrew Milner, *Re-Imagining Cultural Studies: The Promise of Cultural Materialism* (London: SAGE, 2002), 130.

anarchism and post-structuralist speculations, the issue of tension between tradition and innovation in punk becomes a jumping-off point for a comparison of punk rock with folk music.

Like many previous academic accounts of punk, the key difficulty with *Anyone Can Do It* is its theoreticism. The danger of emphasising the theoretical is that it by turn neglects punk's material history, the complexity of its politics and the experiences of its protagonists. Dale sometimes runs this risk with his reliance on those strands of cultural theory and continental philosophy – for example the work of Jacques Derrida – that privilege post-structuralist understandings of language over a solid and specific historical grounding. Because of this abstraction, the book discusses punk alongside historical and political issues to which it is indisputably connected (the tensions between anarchism and socialism), but it does so at a level some way from the experience of those involved in punk's making and development. For instance, instead of an exploration of the differences between, say, the university Marxism of early Scritti Politti, the disaffected working-class labourism of many Oi! bands and the anarcho-separatism of Crass, there is a theoretical comparison of punk to Maoist cadres in China.²⁹ On the question of punk's politics, there is minimal reference to archival research that would support the claim that, with the odd exception, punk was generally a leftist cultural movement.³⁰

Equally, Dale's approach runs the risk of counteracting the book's strengths – its interdisciplinarity, its personal investment – by resembling a long-running tendency in cultural studies to use cultural production as an anchor for theoretical debates that are only loosely related to it. Thus, the 'complex historicity' of culture is reduced to 'the status of mere evidence' for particular theoretical positions.³¹ Even so, Dale's study *does* engage fruitfully with the political tensions generated by punk's traditionalist and avant-garde tendencies, a theme often alluded to in the best popular historical narratives. Savage, for instance, characterises the split as one between 'social realists' and 'arties', while Reynolds implicitly builds on this distinction to portray 'post-punk' as belonging firmly to the latter camp.

To date, such 'division' has rarely been dealt with satisfactorily, tending towards over-simplified polarities of class and education attributed to these apparently neatly separable tendencies.³² The problem in *Anyone Can Do It* is different. Again, it can be attributed to its theoreticism. The categories of 'tradition' and 'innovation' are presented as having assumed meanings that are then conflated with other complex

²⁹ Dale, *Anyone Can Do It*, 77. For more on the politics of Scritti Politti, see David Wilkinson, *Post-Punk, Politics and Pleasure in Britain* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) and Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again*. For more on the politics of Oi!, see Matthew Worley, 'Oi! Oi! Oi! Class, Locality and British Punk', *Twentieth Century British History*, 24, 4 (2013), 606–36 and Johnson, *The Story of Oi!* For more on the politics of Crass, see Cross, 'The Hippies Now Wear Black: Crass and the Anarcho-Punk Movement, 1977–84'; and Gasper, *The Day the Country Died*.

³⁰ Dale, *Anyone Can Do It*, 71.

³¹ John Higgins, *Raymond Williams: Literature, Marxism and Cultural Materialism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 162–5.

³² David Wilkinson, 'Prole Art Threat: The Fall, the Blue Orchids and the Politics of the Post-Punk Working Class Autodidact', *Punk & Post-Punk*, 3, 1 (2014), 67–82.

historical phenomena. So, for Dale, tradition equals Marxism/socialism equals macro, whereas novelty equals anarchism equals micro. This, in turn, leads to an empirically questionable description of US pop-punk band Green Day as having a 'Marxist flavour' but ignores a band such as Gang of Four, who took Marxist theory and aimed for the charts by incorporating the rhythms, timbres and studio experiments of funk, disco, dub reggae and the avant-garde into the punk template of stripped-down rock. Nor is this simply a matter of theory muddying the historical waters. Dale's perspective allows him to ask whether novelty and innovation within punk is truly empowering or if fidelity to tradition would have been more so.³³ Better, perhaps, would be to have asked the question in *historical* terms: 'how far was punk's musical development bound up in the fragmentation that followed its initial coalescence?'; 'how far did form and practice advance some of punk's most challenging concerns and represent particular social groups within it?' Certainly, there are theoretical resources that can help us answer this, for example Raymond Williams' notion of 'the emergent'. The term refers to the complex and variable ways in which new cultural forms are entwined with social, economic and political change. Changes in cultural forms that differ from dominant modes, like punk, are always related to the coalescence of new social groupings.³⁴

It is the question of how these social groupings formed that underpins Nick Crossley's *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion* (2015).³⁵ This is the most recent contribution to punk scholarship and in many ways one of the most sophisticated, both in terms of empirical research and data analysis. Crossley's main argument is that to understand how and why punk took off historically, it is necessary to trace the social networks of people in particular locations. If punk is to be understood as a 'scene', then Crossley's question is 'how did this scene form?' This is pursued through case studies of punk and post-punk in London, Manchester, Sheffield and Liverpool. Theoretically, the work draws on relational sociology, an approach that sees interaction as the key element of social life and uses the Ucinet software program to collate quantitative data into enlightening diagrams of 'who knew whom' at given moments in time. Lest punk romantics bridle at the thought of such a potentially dry, overly scientific approach to the topic, it should be noted that Crossley stresses the personal impact of punk upon his life, its thrill and mystery, as well as the key importance of the 'excitement' and pleasure' of punk to the growth of its networks.³⁶

Overall, *Networks of Sound* is extremely useful in its careful mapping of who knew whom, how, and what that resulted in. It goes beyond rhetoric or scattered evidence to move past the mythology of a punk 'year zero', calmly and clearly explaining how specific scenes coalesced and developed. The detailed chronological narrative of the growing network of London punk in chapter six is especially useful. Having this

³³ Dale, *Anyone Can Do It*, 1.

³⁴ Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', *New Left Review*, 1, 82 (1973), reproduced in *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 2005), 41–2.

³⁵ Nick Crossley, *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Crossley, *Networks of Sound*, 1–2 and 44.

information laid out so methodically will no doubt aid future scholars of punk in tracing further historical documentation of these relationships. Notably, too, Crossley also questions foundational approaches of Dick Hebdige and others that posit punk as a site of political resistance without the support of empirical evidence.³⁷

The prioritisation of network theory does have its limits, especially with regard to Crossley's depiction of punk's historical and socio-economic setting. By concentrating on the minutiae of networks, the effect of the broader historical context on them tends to be neglected or even dismissed. So, for example, Crossley refers to the economic and political crises of the 1970s Britain as a concern of punk but simultaneously rejects its offering explanation for punk's formation. The evidence for this thesis is that punks did not share the same outlook on the crisis and indeed sometimes professed not to care about it.³⁸ But does not such a view perhaps overstate individual consciousness and agency, whilst also underplaying the larger social and historical currents that may inform or direct our feelings and actions whether we are aware of them or not? Archival research might suggest that, in fact, these larger currents *did* impact upon punk's history. Key actors like Malcolm McLaren and Bernie Rhodes, manager of the Clash, always insisted on a social and political dimension to punk, not to mention the timeliness of its revolt. Once it began to be portrayed as an angry response to crisis-ridden Britain by music journalists such as Caroline Coon, affinity with punk tended to be on the basis of some form of discontent, which, as it was experienced in the context of the late 1970s, cannot be disentangled from that moment. Even the Bromley Contingent, the select coterie of scenesters who provided the Sex Pistols with their early audience and were among the least politically engaged of the early punks, viewed the movement as an outlet for existential dissatisfaction and a home for the marginalised. Jordan, the striking shop assistant at Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's SEX boutique, once told Julie Burchill that politics were 'boring', though in the same interview stressed her outsider credentials as expressed in her outfits.³⁹ Indeed, the many public debates that erupted during the era over what counted as punk usually focused on the substance of its rebellious engagement with the wider world. For Crossley, what led punks to network initially was music. This may well be the case, but such cultural production is always shaped by its historical context.

Crossley's scepticism about punk's link to wider social change is matched by his wariness about the importance of politics to punk, in effect a counterview to Dale's insistence that punk be treated as an inherently leftist political phenomenon. By so doing, Crossley may well underestimate punk's political ties. The uniformly retrospective denials of political content or motivations by various punk protagonists quoted in *Networks of Sound* highlight the problems of relying solely on personal testimony.⁴⁰ Historical research, on the other hand, reveals certain recognisable

³⁷ Ibid. 57.

³⁸ Ibid. 60.

³⁹ Julie Burchill, 'Jordan: The Kid Who Wouldn't Wear Clarks Sandals', *NME*, 15 Apr. 1978, 7–8.

⁴⁰ Crossley, *Networks of Sound*, 52.

patterns. One is the connection to the libertarian radicalism of the 1960s and early 1970s shared in varying degrees by many central figures like Westwood, McLaren, Jamie Reid, Richard Boon (manager of Buzzcocks), Geoff Travis (founder of Rough Trade) and Tony Wilson (founder of Factory Records). The other is the sense of oppositionism – however ill-defined – that ran through punk's rhetoric, imagery and practice.

As this suggests, Crossley plays down questions of class and social division in the historical formation of punk. There is a swift muting of class, gender, sexual and racial inequalities as motivating factors on the assumption that this line of argument construes punk as a political rather than a cultural movement.⁴¹ This is not necessarily the case. Culture, imbricated as it is in social life, cannot avoid both reflecting and reflecting upon such divisions whether explicitly or implicitly. For instance, despite their aforementioned absence of consciously political motivation, the Bromley Contingent contributed very early on to punk's development into a subcultural space in which sexual and gender dissidence could often be more confidently expressed.

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The importance attached to punk as a musical form and cultural style continues to fascinate sociologists and cultural commentators. Equally, scholarly interest in punk extends way beyond the United Kingdom.⁴² It remains true, however, that the study of punk and wider youth culture has been neglected by historians.⁴³ That is not to say punk's 'history' has been neglected. Rather, the subjectivist, narrative or overly-

⁴¹ Crossley, *Networks of Sound*, 54–8.

⁴² See, for a UK example of a recent sociological study, David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000). Just a few examples of European studies would include H. Schreiber, *Network of Friends: Hardcore-Punk der 80er Jahre in Europa* (Duisburg: Salon Alter Hammer, 2011); from Czechoslovakia, F. Fuchs, *Kytary a fev aneb co bylo za zdi: Punk rock a hardcore v Československu před rokem 1989* (Brno: self-published, 2002); from France, P. Herr Sang, *Vivre pas survivre* (Paris: Editions du Yunnan, 2007); from Germany, I. G. Dreck auf Papier, ed., *Keine Zukunft war gestern. Punk in Deutschland* (Berlin: Archiv der Jugendkulturen, 2008); F. A. Schneider: *Als die Welt noch unterging. Von Punk zu NDW*, 2nd edn (Mainz: Ventil-Verlag, 2008); H. Skai, *Punk: Versuch der künstlerischen Realisierung einer neuen Lebenshaltung*. (Berlin: Archiv der Jugendkulturen, 2008); M. Boehlke and H. Gericke, eds., *Too Much Future: Punk in der DDR* (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2007); from the Netherlands, J. Goossens and J. Vedder, *Gejuich Was Massaal: geschiedenis van punk in Nederland 1976–82* (Amsterdam: Jan Mets, 1996); from Serbia and former Yugoslavia, Dragan Pavlov and Dejan Šunjka, *Punk u Jugoslaviji* (Yugoslavia: IGP Dedalus, 1991); S. Savic and I. Todorovic, *Novosadska Punk Verzija 1978–2005* (Novi Sad: Studentski Kulturni Centar, 2006); from Sweden, P. Jandreas, *The Encyclopedia of Swedish Punk 1977–1987* (Stockholm: Premium Publishing, 2008); from Turkey, S. Boynik and T. Güldalli, *An Interrupted History of Punk and Underground Resources in Turkey 1978–99* (Athens: BAS, 2007).

⁴³ For a few exceptions, see the work of Arthur Marwick, especially Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 1982) and *ibid.* 'Youth in Britain, 1920–60', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 5, 1 (1970), c.37–51; Osgerby, *Youth Culture in Britain*; D. Fowler, *Youth Culture in Modern Britain, c.1920–c.1970*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2008); A. Horn, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945–60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009).

theorised approaches typically adopted provide opportunity for historical analysis to provide a complementary approach.

One of the assumptions of the CCCS was that youth cultures may be read as sites of resistance to prevailing socio-economic structures, class relations and cultural hegemony.⁴⁴ This, in turn, has informed wider understanding of punk, be it either to affirm punk's cultural import as protest or challenge, or to deny it harboured any such socio-economic or political implications. Regardless, such debate has tended to rely on theoretical conjecture, assertion and memoir. For any claim as to punk's meaning or intent, it is vital to explore the ways in which punk's cultural practices were formed, understood and developed. This means locating punk within its (shifting) cultural, socio-economic and political context. It also means examining what people said and did as they engaged in the cultural forms associated with or developed from punk's emergence in the mid-1970s. To suggest that youth cultures do or do not constitute formative socio-cultural and political spaces through which young people develop, experiment with and acquire understanding of their world necessitates empirical research to provide evidence for either claim.

Such an approach has political connotations. Punk's basic message was 'do it yourself', which in the context of the mid-1970s meant assaulting or circumscribing those cultural, social and political forces that appeared to have suffocated the possibilities promised by the mechanisms of consumption. As the first modern youth culture born into recession, the punk generation entered the world and reported back in conflicting and sometimes ugly ways. Punk's impact was such, moreover, that it continued to inform aspects of youth (and popular) culture long into the 1980s, during which time the deteriorating socio-economic and geo-political climate provided ample material to feed punk's urge for autonomy. To research punk's politics means, therefore, to trace not only its varied political associations and connotations, but to specify the particular cultural, social and political spheres in which their impact has had a greater or lesser effect.

What this involves in practice is the combination of empirical and archival research with a theoretical method that allows for the complexities, contradictions and contentious nature of punk's cultural practice to be embraced. To reduce punk to a moment, a sound or a definite political perspective is to simplify the divergent cultural strands that emerged and developed through the cultural spaces opened up in 1976–77. As may be evident, we favour the cultural materialism originating from the later work of Raymond Williams. This places the stress not simply on contextualising cultural production, but understanding forms like punk as being both historically and socially rooted.⁴⁵ The importance accorded by cultural materialism to cultural, social

⁴⁴ Phil Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community', *Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, 2 (1972), 4–51; John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson and Brian Roberts, 'Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview', in Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds., *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1976), 9–74.

⁴⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1981), 142.

and political institutions in the making and reception of culture likewise bears on an understanding of the spheres in which punk did and did not make a lasting impact.⁴⁶

As to the subcultural perspective on punk: it may be useful to see subcultures as collaborative 'ways of coping' that maintain 'collective identity and individual self-esteem' for those 'ill at ease in the dominant culture'.⁴⁷ Punk is thereby conceived as a formative space that has shaped the engagement of many with the world. Implicit within such 'lived narratives' are 'structures of feeling'. This concept is key to explaining the historical and social resonance of what is usually mystified as intuitive, subjective and felt.⁴⁸ It is, we suggest, crucial to writing the history of punk as a 'history from below', while acknowledging the processes and forces working from above.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Culture*, 33.

⁴⁷ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (London: Continuum, 2004), 175.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 128–35.