

'To what extent did class politics distinguish the punk rock movements of Britain and the United States in the 1970s?'

ALISON BROOKS

MHIS365 From the Beats to Big Brother

When the post-war long boom ended in 1973, the prosperity and innocence that defined the immediate post-war years gave way to stagflation and pessimism that would last for years to come.¹ For the first time ever in both Britain and America, the children of the baby-boomer generation would be worse off than their parents.² An era defined by economic decline and crisis, it was from these environments that punk rock emerged in the United Kingdom and America in the mid-1970s. However, despite developing from similar conditions, the punk rock movements in Britain and the United States differed significantly in a number of crucial areas. In this essay I will analyse to what extent was this differentiation the cause of class politics.

The disillusionment that arose at the end of the long boom saw the beginnings of a new musical style. Many young people now found themselves in much harsher social and economic conditions, however unlike the 1960s, they were without a movement to change these conditions. The movements that had promised change in the 1960s, particularly those of 1968, had petered out by the 1970s.³ As a result, lacking any overt political direction, many youth channelled their cynicism and alienation into the music scene.⁴ Nowhere was this feeling more acutely felt than in Britain. Indeed, during the 1970s, Britain had four prime ministers, four general elections and five official states of emergency.⁵ The end of the long boom and the oil shock of 1973 drove Britain and much of Western Europe and America into recession.⁶ In 1976 the British government was nearly bankrupt and had to go cap in hand to the IMF to request a loan. The IMF's conditions were severe and led to some of the largest cuts to social services in

¹ Chris Harman, *A People's History of the World* (London: Verso, 2008) p. 587.

² *ibid*

³ *ibid*, p. 583-4.

⁴ Dennis Broe, 'Clash and Burn: The Politics of Punk's Permanent Revolution' in *Let Fury Have the Hour: The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer* ed. Antonino D'Ambrosio (New York: Nation Books, 2004) p. 155.

⁵ Andy Beckett, '1970s', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2007

⁶ Harman, *A People's History of the World*, p. 586.

Britain since the 1930s.⁷ As a result, the political and economic crises were naturally felt and reflected in the culture of the time, where strikes occurred *en masse* as stagflation hit the working classes hard and a sluggish economy threatened to send Britain into a social, cultural and economic crisis.⁸ However, when the Labour Party won the 1974 election defeating the Conservatives, for many Britons, especially the working class, Harold Wilson's victory was seen as progressive.⁹ However, Britain under Labour proved no better than it did under the Tories. Indeed, in 1974, the economic situation was so bad that to save money, ministers 'urged citizens to share baths and brush their teeth in the dark.'¹⁰ Television broadcasts ended at 10:30pm each night.¹¹

As a result of these crises the sections of the British population became more alienated than ever from the ruling class. As Andrew Marr notes, where 'political cynicism or unease had been spread in the 50s and 60s by the behaviour of the cliques who ran the country, by the 70s it was driven more by a sense of alienation.'¹² It was from this alienation, particularly amongst working class youth, that punk emerged.¹³ As Sex Pistols frontman Johnny Rotten bemoaned: 'The Labour Party had promised so much but had done so little for the working class.'¹⁴ Indeed, under the Labour leadership of Prime Minister Harold Wilson, unemployment skyrocketed from 700,000 in 1975 to 1.4 million in 1977, with youth the hardest hit.¹⁵ Sex Pistols guitarist Steve Jones summed up the period: 'It was cold and miserable, you couldn't get a job, and everyone was on the dole.'¹⁶

Across the Atlantic, America was undergoing a similar experience. The alienation that sections of British youth felt was similarly expressed by their American counterparts, who, after Watergate and Vietnam, had become overly disillusioned with politics and American society in

⁷ Chris Harman, *Zombie Capitalism* (London: Bookmarks, 2009) p. 220

⁸ Andrew Marr, 'Chaos, rubbish and revolution', *BBC News*, 5 June 2007

⁹ Julien Temple, *The Filth and the Fury*, (Film Four, 2000)

¹⁰ Marr, 'Chaos, rubbish and revolution'

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Temple, *The Filth and the Fury*

¹⁴ Johnny Rotten in Julien Temple, *The Filth and the Fury*

¹⁵ Paul Cobley, 'Leave the Capitol' in *Punk Rock, So What?* ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 176

¹⁶ Steve Jones in Temple, *The Filth and the Fury*

general.¹⁷ This disillusionment was exacerbated with the economic crisis at the end of the long boom. In 1975, the number of working poor Americans, rather, those who had an income of below \$5,500, had risen by 10% from the previous year.¹⁸ Unemployment had significantly increased within the space of 12 months, from 5.6% in 1974 to 8.3% in 1975,¹⁹ and those who had exhausted their unemployment benefits rose from 2 million to 4.3 million over the same time period.²⁰ As the economy stagnated, valuable capital that could alleviate social problems was instead spent on things such as the military, which received a \$10 billion increase.²¹ Like in Britain, it was American youth that were hardest hit. The youth unemployment rate stood at 30%.²²

Yet despite the economic and social similarities between the two countries, American punk began quite differently. From its beginnings, the American punk movement was grounded in the middle-class. As Bill Osgerby notes: 'American punk was rooted in a set of suburban cultural traditions.'²³ Indeed, the pioneers of American punk, The Ramones, were from New York's middle-class suburbia, and Joey Ramone was a staunch Republican.²⁴ Tommy Ramone confirmed the bourgeois nature of the band, commenting in an interview: 'Even from the very beginning, the type of fans the Ramones generated were the kind of people who...became professors and scientists.'²⁵ In contrast, Sex Pistols bassist Glen Matlock was kicked out of the band because Johnny Rotten found him 'unbearable' because of his 'snotty middle class values.'²⁶ Ultimately, what differentiated the two movements was each country's recent history. From its foundation, America was declared as a land of 'equal opportunity' and by the 1950s, during its Cold War fear campaigns and attacks against anything considered working-class or leftist, it was believed American society had transcended class altogether.²⁷ As a result,

¹⁷ Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies*, (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2001) p. 140-1

¹⁸ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 5th ed., 2003) p. 557-8

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*, p. 570

²² *ibid*

²³ Bill Osgerby, 'Chewing Out a Rhythm on My Bubblegum: The Teenage Aesthetic and Genealogies of American Punk,' in *Punk Rock, So What?* ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 160

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 162

²⁵ Tommy Ramone quoted in Alexis Petridis, 'Last Ramone standing', *The Guardian*, 6 January 2005

²⁶ Barry Cain, 'Enemies of the World', *Record Mirror*, 11 June 1977

²⁷ Harman, *A People's History of the World*, p. 548

America lacked the formal class consciousness seen in Britain. Yet class politics affected both the British and American punk scenes in various ways. It was how these politics were expressed that would ultimately distinguish the two movements.

As Karl Marx argued, the dominant ideas in society are those of the ruling class.²⁸ This also includes culture. Much like the class struggle, where there is a dominant culture, there is always a subordinate one.²⁹ Often these cultures clash, but usually they co-exist alongside each other.³⁰ Yet as the ideas of the ruling class, popular culture exists only in relation to a much broader class culture.³¹ In relation to this class culture, Eriksen argues that movements evolve in two distinct ways – as a subculture or as a counterculture. ‘Subcultures,’ he argues ‘develop within the subordinate classes, while countercultures develop within the dominant culture.’³² From this analysis, he concludes that the major distinguisher of the punk movements in the UK and US were that the British experience was a subculture, whereas the American was a counterculture. American punk was rooted in middle-class suburbia and the experiences of middle-class youth, whereas English punk was distinctly working-class.³³ As Bruce Dancis notes: ‘British punk often concerns working-class themes that come out of the life experiences of the musicians. In the United States punk rock has little of this class dimension.’³⁴ As a result, American punk ‘often seems postured.’³⁵

Lyrics served as the main distinguisher of the punk movements, with the marked difference being that British punk acts were driven by politically-charged lyrics, something markedly absent from their American counterparts. Often these politics, due to British punk’s position as a subculture, were animated from the shared experiences of the working class, and often reflected the everyday struggles of unemployed or disillusioned youth, as The Clash’s ‘Career Opportunities’ details:

They offered me the office, offered me the shop

²⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Classics, 2015) p.31

²⁹ Neil Eriksen, ‘Popular Culture and Revolutionary Theory: Understanding Punk Rock’, *Theoretical Review* 18 (1980): p. 6

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

³² *ibid*

³³ *ibid*

³⁴ Bruce Dancis, ‘Safety Pins and Class Struggle: Punk Rock and the Left’, *Socialist Review (US)* 39 (1978): p. 63

³⁵ *ibid*

They said I'd better take anything they'd got
 Do you wanna make tea at the BBC?
 Do you wanna be, do you really want to be a cop?
 Career opportunities, the ones that never knock
 Every job they offer you is to keep you out the dock
 Career opportunities, the ones that never knock³⁶

Commenting on the song and the overall atmosphere in England at the time, Clash frontman Joe Strummer noted: 'Industrial society offered nothing really, and as we moved to this more fragmented society with more emphasis on technology, the state was looking for us to work according to our class.... It all seemed about controlling class, particularly the lower classes.'³⁷

Similarly, lyrics often called for working-class solidarity in the wake of these common experiences, as sung by Sham 69 in 'If the Kids are United':

Just take a look around you
 What do you see
 Kids with feelings like you and me
 Understand him, he'll understand you
 For you are him, and he is you
 If the kids are united then we'll never be divided³⁸

Other bands were explicitly political, such as the anarchist band Crass and the socialist band Gang of Four, or sung about highly political situations, such as the Northern Irish band Stiff Little Fingers, whose song 'Alternative Ulster' actively called for Irish youth to take charge:

Take a look where you're livin'

³⁶ The Clash, 'Career Opportunities', *The Clash* (CBS Records, 1977)

³⁷ Joe Strummer quoted in Antonino D'Ambrosio, 'Let Fury Have the Hour: The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer' in *Let Fury Have the Hour: The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer* ed. Antonino D'Ambrosio (New York: Nation Books, 2004) p. 10

³⁸ Sham 69, 'If the Kids are United', Single Release (Polydor Records, 1978)

You got the Army on the street
 And the RUC dog of repression
 Is barking at your feet
 Is this the kind of place you wanna live?
 Is this were you wanna be?
 Is this the only life we're gonna have?
 What we need is
 Alternative Ulster!³⁹

In contrast, the lyrics of the majority of American punk acts were distinctly non-political. As David Simonelli notes: 'In New York, punk was born of affluent boredom; in London, punk sprang from truly desperate circumstances.'⁴⁰ American lyrics, particularly those of The Ramones, were 'usually basic and as dumb as possible.'⁴¹ For example, 'Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue' which; as the title suggests, was a song about sniffing glue:

Now I wanna sniff some glue
 Now I want to have somethin' to do
 All the kids want to sniff some glue
 All the kids want somethin' to do.⁴²

As Dancis notes, the differences between British and American punk lay predominately in the fact that '...British punk... is predominately working class, and reflects the existence of often intense class struggle in British society, and is influenced by the left' whereas American punk was defined by 'the absence of a viable left and the same degree of class antagonism.'⁴³ However, this was due to the fact that political expressions of class were far more common in

³⁹ Stiff Little Fingers, 'Alternative Ulster', *Inflammable Material* (Rough Trade Records, 1979)

⁴⁰ David Simonelli, 'Anarchy, Pop and Violence: Punk Rock Subculture and the Rhetoric of Class, 1976-78' *Contemporary British History* 16:2 (2002) p. 127

⁴¹ Phil Strongman, *Pretty Vacant: A History of Punk*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008) p. 61

⁴² The Ramones, 'Now I Wanna Sniff Some Glue', *The Ramones* (Sire Records, 1976)

⁴³ Dancis, 'Safety Pins and Class Struggle', p. 62

Britain than America and class rhetoric, especially due to the prominence of trade unions, was much more pronounced.

The prominence of left politics in Britain as opposed to the conservatism prominent in America meant that British punk bands were more likely to be political. The Clash actively supported left-wing causes and revolutionaries such as the Sandinistas, and their songs were often anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist and revolutionary.⁴⁴ 'Clampdown' called for revolution, telling working-class youth to 'Kick over the wall and 'cause governments to fall' and to harness their anger and channel it into worthy causes 'Let fury have the hour/anger can be power/Don't you know you can use it?'⁴⁵ Similarly, 'Garageland' raged against the upper classes: 'I don't wanna hear about what the rich are doing/I don't wanna go where the rich are going/They think they're so clever, they think they're so right/But the truth is only known by guttersnipes.'⁴⁶ Even the band's name was interpreted as political, 'giving voice to Marx's dialectic of change through struggle.'⁴⁷ Their working-class consciousness led the *NME* to describe the Clash as the 'Thinking Man's Yobs.'⁴⁸ Yet bands whose lyrics weren't overtly political like the Clash still vented their anger in leftist tones due to similar class experiences. The Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' was a swipe at the British monarchy and the absurdity of the British upper classes: 'God save the Queen/the fascist regime/that made you a moron/Potential H-bomb.'⁴⁹ In an interview for the *Daily Mirror* in 1977, Johnny Rotten noted: 'Our songs are anti-God, anti-the Queen, anti-the palsied values of present day society. I am a revolutionary....An anarchist. I want to stir people up to think for themselves.'⁵⁰ Similarly, the Damned criticised religion and the church, echoing Marx's criticisms of the church in their song 'Antipope': 'religion doesn't mean a thing/It's just another way of being right wing.'⁵¹ In comparison, the distinct conservatism in American punk was highlighted when the Clash toured

⁴⁴ Ambrosio, 'Let Fury Have the Hour', p. 13-4

⁴⁵ The Clash, 'Clampdown', *London Calling* (CBS Records, 1979)

⁴⁶ The Clash, 'Garageland', *The Clash* (CBS Records, 1977)

⁴⁷ Broe, 'Clash and Burn' p. 157

⁴⁸ *New Musical Express*, 'The Clash: Thinking Man's Yobs', 2 April 1977

⁴⁹ Sex Pistols, 'God Save the Queen', *Never Mind the Bollocks* (Virgin Records, 1977)

⁵⁰ *Daily Mirror*, 'I'm a revolutionary!', 19 December 1977

⁵¹ The Damned, 'Antipope', *Machine Gun Etiquette* (Chiswick Records, 1979)

America in the late 1970s and were described by the American press as ‘evil punk rockers’ who were there to ‘spread communism to American youth.’⁵²

In contrast, American punk bands catered to a purely middle-class audience, who either bemoaned about bourgeois alienation, such as the Dead Boys’ ‘Ain’t Nothin’ to Do’, or sang about horses and poetry, as did Patti Smith.⁵³ Indeed, one writer noted in the 1970s American punk zine *Search and Destroy* noted that American punk was made up of: ‘weirdos and outcasts and artist types, post-beatnik types.... in their twenties and thirties.’⁵⁴ Caroline Coon commented on these differences in an article in a 1976 edition of the British music magazine *Melody Maker*: ‘While New York cultivates avant-garde and intellectual punks like Patti Smith and Television, the British teenager...has little time for such aesthetic requirements.’⁵⁵ Furthermore, there was a large age difference between the members of the punk movements. For example, in 1976, punk’s ‘year zero’, Johnny Ramone was twenty-seven, Patti Smith was thirty and Debbie Harry thirty-one. In contrast, Johnny Rotten was twenty, Sid Vicious nineteen, and Ari Up fourteen. This class differentiation was also seen in punk fashion, as Eriksen argues:

Middle class youth can copy the style of the British punks and are afforded the economic and ideological space to make it a whole lifestyle, similar to the way the hippies dropped out, turned on and tuned in. It is primarily those who do not have to work for a living who can afford the outrageous blue, green and orange punk hair styles and gold safety pins. The working class generally cannot choose to go to work with orange hair.⁵⁶

Yet, admittedly, the Ramones and other American punk acts did share similarities with British punks in that they detailed the alienation and disillusionment the youth of the 1970s felt. Whilst the Ramones never expressed an anger so raw as Johnny Rotten when he sang ‘No future for me, no future for you’ on ‘God Save the Queen’, their song ‘I Wanna Be Well’ highlighted the same, if somewhat mellowed, feelings as they sang ‘My future’s bleak, ain’t it neat?’⁵⁷ Similarly, Richard Hell’s ‘Blank Generation’ and Generation X’s ‘Your Generation’

⁵² D’Ambrosio, ‘Let Fury Have the Hour’, p. 11

⁵³ Savage, *England’s Dreaming*, p. 91

⁵⁴ Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* (London: Helter Skelter Publishing, 2005) p. 244

⁵⁵ *ibid*, p. 245

⁵⁶ Eriksen, ‘Popular Culture and Revolutionary Theory’ p. 27

⁵⁷ The Ramones, ‘I Wanna Be Well’, *Rocket to Russia* (Sire Records, 1977)

summed up the feelings of 1970s youth, highlighting their apathy with modern society and their position within it. However, for all their similarities, US lyrics were taken from middle-class experiences, experiences that their UK counterparts never shared. As Bill Osgerby notes 'The kitsch emblems of post-war America's consumer culture were simultaneously parodied and celebrated [in American punk].'⁵⁸ 'Ain't Nothin' to Do' by the American punk band Dead Boys depicted these feelings:

I'm so sick of TV
 You know, I'm getting bored of the tube
 I'm so sick of romance
 And I'm gettin' real sick of you
 I wanna get on out of here
 Find me somethin' to do.⁵⁹

This alienation and boredom was, due to their working-class roots, articulated far more effectively in British punk rock. X-Ray Spex's song 'Art-I-Ficial', for example, attacked the root cause of alienation, namely consumer society:

I know I'm artificial
 But don't put the blame on me
 I was reared with appliances
 In a consumer society⁶⁰

The Slits conveyed similar sentiments in their song 'Spend, Spend, Spend':

I want to buy
 I need consoling

⁵⁸ Osgerby, 'Chewing Out a Rhythm on My Bubblegum', p. 160

⁵⁹ The Dead Boys, 'Ain't Nothin' to Do', *Young Loud and Snotty* (Sire Records, 1977)

⁶⁰ X-Ray Spex, 'Art-I-Ficial', *Germfree Adolescents* (EMI, 1978)

I need something new
 Something trivial would do
 I want to satisfy this empty feeling⁶¹

Yet more importantly, American punk was imbedded in a musical tradition that British punk rejected outright – pop music. As Bill Osgerby notes, American punk ‘drew influence...from a pop heritage that encompassed the bobby-soxed girl groups of the ‘50s and the rough-and-ready surf ‘frat rock; of the early to mid-60s.’⁶² Indeed, the Ramones took their name from Paul McCartney’s pseudonym he used to check into hotels.⁶³ In stark contrast, British punks vowed undying hatred for bands like the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, who they saw as middle-class sell-outs. In an interview for the German music magazine *Bravo* in 1976, Johnny Rotten noted: ‘We all come from London’s worst backyard, and we want to sweep away the whole Rock scene. We hate everything that is pleasing, bourgeois and boring.’⁶⁴ The Clash’s ‘1977’ represented this widespread hostility with the lyrics ‘No Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones in 1977.’⁶⁵ It should be noted that the emergence of punk in Britain was also as much to do with the perceived stagnation of the British music scene as it was to do with a struggling British economy. The ‘rock royalty’ status given to bands such as the Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd, and chart shows such as *Old Grey Whistle Test* and *Top of the Pops* that reinforced these sentiments, were an anathema to large swathes of inner city British youth like Johnny Rotten. In contrast, the pop sensibilities within American punk and its position as a counterculture meant that the US punk movement was not a direct reaction against classic rock as its British counterpart was.⁶⁶

Whilst class politics were the main distinguisher between both movements, racial and gender politics also served to further distinguish both the British and American punk scenes. The very presence of class politics within British punk meant that there was a diverse range of

⁶¹ The Slits, ‘Spend, Spend, Spend’, *Cut* (Island Records, 1979)

⁶² Osgerby, ‘Chewing Out a Rhythm on My Bubblegum’, p. 156

⁶³ Strongman, *Pretty Vacant*, p. 60

⁶⁴ *Bravo*, ‘Punk Rock: Sex Pistols’, September 1976. original in German, translated by me

⁶⁵ The Clash, ‘1977’ Single Release (CBC Records, 1977)

⁶⁶ Eriksen, ‘Popular Culture and Revolutionary Theory’, p. 17

bands, something which the American movement lacked. Yet the working-class experience meant people could become polarised much more easily than the middle-classes. In 1977, the British unemployment figure was 1,622,000. Of that number, 313,000 were under eighteen and 708,000 under twenty-five.⁶⁷ To make matters worse, by the late 1970s the intense political and social conservatism characterised by Thatcher that would dominate the next two decades was already being felt.⁶⁸ What resulted was a split in working class solidarity. As one music critic noted: ‘The reactionary build-up was creating a hostile, violent environment in which many were choosing sides in the escalating conflict between marginalised communities and the white power structure.’⁶⁹

As a result, traditional leftist working-class subcultures such as Skinheads became increasingly right-wing, and many right-wing bands also arose in response to this crisis.⁷⁰ Whereas leftist bands like the Clash attacked the upper classes in their songs as the cause of this crisis, right-wing and openly neo-Nazi bands such as Skrewdriver, towing the Tory and National Front line, blamed immigration and immigrants, as detailed in their song ‘When the Boat Comes In’:

Take no shit from anyone cause Great Britain rules,
 We fight the communists, ‘cause communists are fools
 Try to take our nation, and give it to the blacks
 We won’t take it anymore, we’re gonna take out nation back
 Nigger, nigger, get on that boat
 Get out of here,
 Go, go, go....⁷¹

⁶⁷ Dancis, ‘Safety Pins and Class Struggle’, p. 71

⁶⁸ Antonino D’Ambrosio, ‘Whatever It Takes’ in *Let Fury Have the Hour: The Punk Rock Politics of Joe Strummer* ed. Antonino D’Ambrosio (New York: Nation Books, 2004) p. 186

⁶⁹ *ibid*

⁷⁰ *ibid*

⁷¹ Skrewdriver, ‘When the Boat Comes In’, Single Release (1983)

Yet these extremist bands were always within the minority, and due to the strong leftist politics amongst sections of the British working class, left-wing punk bands quickly responded to this racism by participating in festivals such as *Rock Against Racism* against right-wing ideas and the National Front, Britain's leading far right party.⁷² Indeed, many punk bands such as the Clash and the Slits rejected racism by playing and embracing black music such as reggae.⁷³ As David Simonelli notes:

The feeling of oppression that blacks felt in a white British society mirrored the sense of oppression that punks felt in a bankrupt society. By 1976, with the economy in a shambles, oppression by the white man easily translated into the authoritarian cultural dominance of the middle classes.⁷⁴

In contrast, the lack of a leftist agenda and a working class experience meant that racism went virtually unchallenged in American punk.⁷⁵ American punk's position as a countercultural movement meant that it was dominated by privileged white men; meaning sexism and racism were far more prevalent in American punk than British.⁷⁶ Indeed, due to the lack of class politics, no similar festivals to *Rock Against Racism* were held in America. Bands such as The Dictators had songs such as 'Master Race Rock', and the Nuns' 'Decadent Jew' ranted against Jews and immigrants:

I own all the projects
On 101st Avenue
I hate the niggers
And the Puerto Ricans too
'Cause I'm a decadent Jew.⁷⁷

The difference between these bands and British bands such as Skrewdriver was that Skrewdriver existed only as an underground band that didn't enjoy much popularity until the

⁷²Eriksen, 'Popular Culture and Revolutionary Theory', p. 28

⁷³ Simonelli, 'Anarchy, Pop and Violence', p. 127

⁷⁴ *ibid*

⁷⁵ Danics, 'Safety Pins and Class Struggle', p. 75

⁷⁶ *ibid*

⁷⁷ The Nuns, 'Decadent Jew', Single Release, (414 Records, 1979)

1980s, well after British punk had died and the Conservatives were in power. The Dictators and the Nuns on the other hand were part of the American punk mainstream.⁷⁸

Along with race, punk also articulated gender. Punk was predominately a masculine movement, characterised by violence and anger, emotions considered quintessentially masculine. This masculinity was further reinforced through the names of various punk bands, particularly in Britain. Bands such as the Sex Pistols, Penetration, The Vibrators and the Buzzcocks all alluded to a sexual, masculine imagery. Yet women also played an important role in punk rock. Indeed, in Britain it was common to have either all-female bands or bands fronted by women, such as the Slits, the Adverts and later the Raincoats. In contrast, this was rarely seen in the United States. The Runaways, perhaps the only successful American all-female band, had all but split up by the time punk became big in America.⁷⁹

However, due to similar class experiences, British female bands, much like their male counterparts, also expressed political sentiments in their songs. X-Ray Spex's quasi-feminist song 'Oh Bondage Up Yours!' which leader singer Poly Styrene described as 'a call for liberation' against capitalism and its oppression of women,⁸⁰ opens with the lines 'Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard/But I think oh bondage up yours!'⁸¹ Similarly, female bands also embraced their sexuality in direct opposition to the hypermasculinity of male punk bands. The British all-girl band The Slits posed topless for the cover of their first album *Cut*, and both their name and the name of their album alluded to female sexuality. In this respect, because they were women, the Slits were political from the outset. Indeed, at a concert in Berlin, frontwoman Ari Up told the audience, that because of their musical style, people thought: '...that we want to be men. We are women. We knew that from the start. We women say 'We can [do] everything men can.' No. I am a woman and can do what *women* can.'⁸² Whereas the album covers of many male punk bands were quite plain, the cover of *Cut* in itself was a political statement. The album cover 'both parodied and debunked the notion of using

⁷⁸ Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, p. 230

⁷⁹ The original members of the band had split in 1977.

⁸⁰ Poly Styrene quoted in Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991) p. 327

⁸¹ X-Ray Spex, 'Oh Bondage Up Yours!', *Germfree Adolescents* (EMI, 1978)

⁸² The Slits live at Tempodrom in Berlin, 19 June 1981. Original in German, translated by me. available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9D8LmUHW48s>

women's bodies as tools to sell a record.⁸³ Ari Up noted: 'We decided to cover ourselves in mud and show that women could be sexy without dressing in a prescribed way.'⁸⁴ Arguably, the nudity of the Slits was a direct swipe at the hypermasculinity of the not only the punk scene, but the wider music scene as a whole, where previously bands such as Roxy Music had often used half-naked models as album covers.⁸⁵ The Slits' nudity challenged traditionally female stereotypes of what constituted as beauty. Much like Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex, the Slits, as women, also commented on the oppression and role of women in a consumer society. Their song 'Typical Girls' conveyed these sentiments:

Typical girls are looking for something
Typical girls fall under spells
Typical girls buy magazines
Typical girls feel like hell
Typical girls worry about spots, fat
And natural smells...
Who invented the typical girl?⁸⁶

Indeed, the very fact that the Slits were all women was confronting in itself. Ari Up, who was only fourteen at the time, shocked even male audiences when she urinated live on stage, even though it was an action often performed by male punks.⁸⁷ Whilst she later claimed she did it out of necessity rather than for shock value,⁸⁸ the reaction of the audience highlighted that within the punk scene, female sexuality was considered dangerous. Slits guitarist Viv Albertine noted this fact:

⁸³ Brian Cogan, 'Typical Girls? Fuck Off, You Wanker! Re-Evaluating the Slits and Gender Relations in Early British Punk and Post-Punk,' *Women's Studies* 41:2 (2012): p. 131

⁸⁴ Ari Up quoted in *ibid*

⁸⁵ Roxy Music's albums *Roxy Music* and *Country Life* are two such examples.

⁸⁶ The Slits, 'Typical Girls', *Cut*

⁸⁷ Cogan, 'Typical Girls?', p.125

⁸⁸ *ibid*

Everywhere we went, we had to almost be strapped to our seats, every hotel we had to be smuggled in. We were not being nice little girls....If we'd been men, it would have been: 'Oooh aren't they great, you know, like the Stones or the Pistols.' Because we were women there was this constant sexuality.⁸⁹

In contrast, the female punks in the American scene displayed and upheld this 'typical girl' stereotype rejected by the Slits. Patti Smith was an ex-model, and Debbie Harry a one-time Playboy Bunny. Furthermore, neither Smith's nor Blondie's songs were political in any sense. In fact, Blondie songs were often sexist, such as 'Rip Her to Shreds', which encouraged the beating up of groupies:

She looks like the Sunday comics
She thinks she's Brenda Starr
Her nose job is real atomic
All she needs is an old knife scar
Yeah, she's so dull, come on rip her to shreds⁹⁰

The working-class leftist sentiments within British punk meant that their racial and gender politics were far more progressive than their American counterparts. However, it was the presence of class politics and class consciousness within British punk, due to the open discussion of class in British politics, that championed this progression in the first place. Thus, class politics *was* the distinguishing factor between American and British punk rock. However, it was the alienation experienced by both British and American youths at the end of the long boom that gave rise to the punk rock movements in the first place, and it was ultimately, despite class rhetoric, this alienation that drove British and American punk bands. Thus whilst the British and American scenes differentiated due to their class politics, they remained very

⁸⁹ Viv Albertine quoted in Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p. 335

⁹⁰ Blondie, 'Rip Her to Shreds', *Blondie* (Private Stock Records, 1976). Brenda Starr was a glamorous woman in a comic strip of the same name. The song is ironic in that Debbie Harry was later friends with Nancy Spungen, later Sid Vicious' girlfriend, who was perhaps the biggest groupie on the US punk scene.

similar in that they both articulated the feelings of alienated youth, for whom the 1970s was often the worst of times rather than the best.

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