The Punk Politics of Global Communication, or, It's A Punk Rock Planet After All

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Largely ignored by scholars of world politics, the global punk rock scene provides a fruitful basis for exploring the multiple circuits of exchange and circulation of goods, people, and messages. Punk can also offer new ways of thinking about international relations and communication from the lived experiences of people's daily lives. At its core, this paper has two arguments. First, punk offers the possibility for counter-hegemonic expression within systems of global communication. For the past thirty years, punk rock has simultaneously worked within and against the hegemony of telecommunication networks, navigating an increasingly interconnected and mediated world. Second, punk rock is not just a medium of global communication; the medium itself becomes a subversive message in its own right. Focusing on punk's Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethos and the resource it offers for resisting the multiple forms of alienation in modern society, the story I construct here is one of agency and empowerment often overlooked by traditional IR.

Growing up in Jacksonville, Florida, a backwater town in the southern United States, I did not have access to the social networks, independent record stores, and local fanzines of established punk scenes. My exposure to punk initially came from a friend who was better traveled than I. In the late 1970s, he exposed me to the Clash, the

Damned, Sex Pistols, and a few American hardcore bands. Many of those bands eventually signed to major record labels, making it easier for me to find their releases in local record stores. I was fortunate in the early 1980s to meet a girl from Nevada who sent me a few tapes of bands on indie labels, as well as several copies of local fanzines. I ordered numerous tapes from the bands and the indie record labels advertising in them, and ordered more from the catalogs the indie labels sent me. By the time I reached high school, some older kids had formed a punk band called Stevie Stiletto and the Switchblades. Unable to get access to any live venues in town, Stevie Stiletto (they soon shortened the name) booked themselves in local National Guard Armories and community centers before opening their own venue, the 730 Club, in part to try to nurture a scene (interview with Ray McKelvey, 25 May 2006). This club became my major social destination, and I attended almost every show on any given weekend. Touring outside of Jacksonville, Stevie Stiletto managed to gain access to the national punk scene and utilized those contacts to book their own shows. So I was soon exposed to bands like Black Flag, Sonic Youth, SNFU, Neon Christ, and others who would play shows at the 730 Club on their way between the bigger scenes of Atlanta and Miami.

Exposure to live acts was extremely important to me, as it was to numerous others drawn to punk rock. Live punk rock actively tore down the barriers between artists and audience, intentionally exploding and deconstructing the image of rock star. That aspect of punk music is frequently lost with recordings. A Clash album was sonically different from other records, but the distance between the listener and the band remained. For me, seeing live punk bands like Stevie Stiletto was inspirational because suddenly I realized that I could do that. Inspired, I got a beat up guitar and convinced two friends to join me,

one on a makeshift drum kit and the other on a saxophone (none of us could actually play our instruments). Calling ourselves the Red Army we crashed a party, set up in the living room, and started bashing on our instruments with me screaming spontaneous lyrics. We were invited to leave the party (after a chair was thrown through a window), but my life as a punk rocker had begun.

My engagement with punk reflects its dual-nature within global communication. On the one hand, through my exposure to punk in the late 1970s-early 1980s, I became aware of political and social events taking place around the world. Listening to punk bands like the Clash was frequently an edifying experience, and I quickly learned about Third World resistance to Western imperialism, historic labor struggles, and portrayals of daily life from socio-economic classes and races different from my own. I recall vividly deciding that I needed to read the newspaper daily after the release of the Clash's *Sandinista* album because it spoke of/to current events about which I was painfully unaware. On the other hand, punk rock was also a message on its own. It conveyed a means by which I could disalienate myself. It showed me that I could and should "do it myself." And given what I took to be punks' inherent anti-status quo position, I realized that to struggle was not just a means, but an ends in and of itself. For me, punk offered a healthy resistance to dominant forces and social norms, whatever they may be, and this message was conveyed not just in the lyrics of punk music, but in the entirety of punk.

"You're Not Punk and I'm Telling Everyone"

The term "punk" first emerged regularly in accepted terminology in the late 1970s with regards to the music scene in New York City's Lower East Side. Legs McNiel

claimed to coin the term “punk” for the music centered around the clubs CBGBs and Max’s Kansas City (McNeil and McCain 1997).[1] Bands associated with this emerging New York scene included the Ramones, Television, Blondie, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and others. But punk music and style gained international attention largely through the emergence of a scene in the UK, particularly in London, and specifically around the well-publicized antics of the Sex Pistols, a band “invented” by their manager Malcolm McLaren. Informed partly by the New York scene (McLaren briefly managed the New York Dolls), the UK punk style also drew from its antecedent subcultures, from skinheads, mods, rude boys, glam rockers, as well as reggae and rockabilly. Heavily conditioned by class politics and working class culture, the original British punk scene both reflected and mocked the disintegration of British society in the late 1970s. Bands like the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Slits, the Buzzcocks, X-Ray Spex, the Raincoats, Gang of Four, the Mekons, the Damned, and others emerged from within the British punk scene to create music that Greil Marcus characterized this way:

> as a sound, it seemed to make no sense at all, to make nothing, only to destroy, and this is why it was a new sound, and why it drew a line between itself and everything that came before it, just as Elvis Presley did in 1954 and the Beatles did in 1963, as though nothing could be easier, or more impossible, than to erase those lines with a blur of footnotes (Marcus 1989: 64).

Musically, punk rock reflected a certain degree of diversity. As Chumbawamba’s Boff later observed, “in Britain, a lot of the original punk which fired us up was really diverse and challenging. From the Fall to Wire, ATV, the Slits, the Raincoats, they were not all playing 4/4, male rock music. That was really important to us, that all these people were a part of punk” (Boff in Sinker 2001: 124).

[1] It has also been asserted that Nick Tosches first used the term in a July 1970 essay, while Dave Marsh takes credit for using the term “punk rock” first in the magazine *Creem* in 1971 (DeRogatis 2000: 118-19).

The punk scene that emerged out of Britain and New York quickly spread and evolved, and major punk scenes were created in Washington, DC (see Andersen and Jenkins 2001), Los Angeles (see Spitz and Mullen 2001), as well as in cities and small towns across the globe, from Mexico (see O'Connor 2002 and 2004), Colombia, and Argentina to North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. To quote Marcus again, punk provided "a surge of new voices unprecedented in the geopolitics of popular culture – a surge of voices that, for a time, made a weird phrase like 'the geopolitics of popular culture' seem like a natural fact" (Marcus 1989: 65). By the beginning of the 21st century, it was hard to define "punk" given the wide variations in music and styles associated with the term. And like all musical genres, punk has mutated, fragmented and been appropriated in the three decades following its inception.

Borrowing from the work of Alan O'Connor, I conceptualize punk as a cultural field: a relatively autonomous space in society in which people and groups compete for recognition and cultural resources (see O'Connor 2002 and forthcoming). The field of punk, like other musical fields, is influenced by the corporate music industry and popular culture, and is typified by internal debates and struggles about the boundaries of the field, and what and who are "inside" the field (i.e., who is a "true" punk). Thinking about punk as a cultural field allows one to investigate the diversity of punk and the processes involved in maintaining it as a relatively autonomous field.[2] Rather than defining and reifying artificial boundaries of what is and is not punk, I am more concerned about how the field of punk provides individuals with cultural resources for expressing counter-hegemonic resistance within systems of global communication.

[2] While I am grateful to Alan O'Connor for his insights about how to theorize punk, in no way should he be held responsible for how I have (mis)used his ideas.

While much attention is usually paid to the anger and energy of punk rock (a theme which I will return to at the end of this essay), I want to highlight three elements that can be found within the cultural field of punk that are significant for articulating counter-hegemony within global communication.[3] First, I propose that punk provides the possibility for a critical opposition to the status quo. For many within the punk community an anti-establishment disposition is a defining element of the genre. As Pat Thetic of the Pittsburgh punk band Anti-Flag said "Punk rock is a statement against the status quo. Punk rock is about fighting against the status quo and trying to find other ways of seeing the world that are more productive and less destructive to people" (interview, 12 May 2005). Both the original New York and London punk scenes were steeped in an anti-status quo disposition. Setting aside its lyrical content, the music generated often challenged established musical conventions and embraced dissonance and "noise;" arguably representing an aural political intervention (see Blieker 2005). According to Ryan Moore, the original British punk subculture exemplified a "culture of deconstruction" in response to the condition of late 20th century postmodernity, offering "the practice of appropriating the symbols and media which have become the foundation of political economy and social order in order to undermine their dominant meanings and parody the power behind them" (Moore 2004: 311). Moore's argument draws from Dick Hebdidge (1979), who noted that UK punk style employed techniques of juxtaposition,

[3] This is not an argument that there are defining elements (or even common characteristics) of "authentic" punk. A great deal of time and energy is spent policing the boundaries between what is punk and what is not, and I'm not interested in joining those debates. Rather I am claiming that these are three of the more pronounced elements that have been employed as the cultural field of punk has been constructed and evolved over three decades. These elements are not exclusive to punk (there was a strong DIY ethos in traditional American folk music, for instance). Moreover, there is a great deal of diversity in the extent these elements are found across the punk field, as I will note later in the essay.

pastiche and self-reflexive irony to disrupt the transparency of meaning and the ideological "common sense" it supports. For many punks, the anti-aesthetic they employed was a mocking assault on dominant social norms. This ethos is still a major element within various contemporary punk scenes.

Second, I propose that punk provides the possibility for disalienation, offering means of resisting the multiple forms of alienation prevalent in a late capitalist society. From its inception, the simplicity of punk was aimed at breaking down the barriers between composers and performers, and between performers and audience. Punk sprang from a social context in which the youth of London and New York struggled with feelings of alienation from the social, economic and political forces around them. Growing up in Jacksonville, punk offered me a way to resist the multiple forms of alienation in modern southern American middle-class society. Politics and economics appeared as distant, uncontrolled, alien forces; constituted in everyday life by the separation of the specialized activities of professionals and intellectuals from the residue of everyday life in work, family, and leisure (Davies 2005). Musically, for example, rock bands played in concert halls separated from the audience in ways that reinforced the "rock star" myth. For many, punk offered an attractive alternative. As Matt Davies notes, "Punks strove to eliminate the distinctions between performers and audience, and did so by a radical form of egalitarianism: anyone could be a punk, and any punk could play in a band or, if they preferred, to publish a zine, to organize shows, or to produce or distribute records. A punk scene is of punks, for punks, by punks" (Davies 2005: 126). In the face of the alienating process of specialization and professionalization, punk offers resources for participation and access.

Third, I propose that punk is often characterized by a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. The DIY ethos reflects an intentional transformation of punks from consumers of the mass media to agents of cultural production. As Legs McNeil wrote in his low-budget, self-produced fanzine *Punk*: "Punk rock – any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock 'n' roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitations and/or potential, and usually do so out of frustration, hostility, a lot of nerve and a need for ego fulfillment" (quoted in Leblanc 1999: 35). An example of the DIY ethos is represented in a well-known, widely-circulated drawing of how to play three chords on a guitar, accompanied by the caption "Now Form a Band." Bands like the Buzzcocks and Scritti Politti printed instructions for making a recording on the hand-made covers of their own albums. Fanzines carried similar messages, informing readers how to play chords, make a record, distribute that record, and book their own shows. *Punk Planet* magazine carried a special section in which contributors offered their own DIY input, and the magazine *MaximumRockNRoll* created a resource guide to the global punk scene called "Book Your Own Fucking Life" (MaximumRockNRoll and the Amoeba Collective 2002), which is currently online at http://www.byofl.org. Daniel Sinker, founder of the magazine *Punk Planet*, points out that "Punk said that *anyone* could take part – in fact, anyone *should* take part" (Sinker 2001: 9). He continues, "Punk has always been about asking 'why' and then doing something about it. It's about picking up a guitar and asking 'Why can't I play this?' It's about picking up a typewriter and asking, 'Why don't my opinions count?' It's about looking at the world around you and asking, 'Why are things as fucked up as they are?' And then it's about looking inwards at yourself and asking 'Why aren't I doing anything about this?'" (Sinker 2001: 10)

Seeing bands playing live helped me realize that I too could (and should) do it myself. Stevie Stiletto were wonderful role models in this regards. They booked their own shows at community centers, and when they were unable to secure regular live shows, they opened up their own clubs (in addition to the 730 Club, they opened a club called the Blighted Area in Jacksonville Beach). They released their own music on cassette tapes with hand-photocopied covers. Their music distribution system largely relied on themselves.[4] For many, this DIY ethos is *the* defining element of punk rock. Roxy Epoxy, of the Portland-based band the Epoxies, recalled "We started out the way most punk bands do. We booked ourselves, we piled into a van that we hoped to hell wasn't going to break down. We slept on floors. We lived out of gas stations. We could barely afford hotels here and there. And it's still that way. We set everything up ourselves. We build a lot of our own stuff and put together little machines. It is thoroughly DIY" (interview, 29 July 2006). Ian MacKaye of Fugazi observed: "One aspect of Do It Yourself is that you really have to do it yourself. It's work! We manage ourselves, we book ourselves, we do our own equipment upkeep, we do our own recording, we do our own taxes. We don't have other people to do that stuff" (MacKaye in Sinker 2001: 19).

It is not my contention that these three elements are exclusive to the punk field. Indeed, over its three decades of existence, punk has been influenced by a wide array of other musical genres and cultural fields. Some of those fields have also been typified by a tradition of musical resistance and a DIY ethos (e.g., folk music, reggae, hip hop), while others have provided outlets for anger of a more apolitical bent (e.g., some forms of

[4] Even today, their CDs are available in Jacksonville for $5 at several local stores, or via their web site http://www.myspace.com/steviestiletto. I comment on the impact of the internet later in the essay.

heavy metal). My point here is to suggest that punk provides individuals within that cultural field with resources for agency and empowerment. But I do not want to suggest some heroic narrative about the politics of punk, in large part because there is no such a thing.

Attempts to discuss "punk politics," such as Craig O'Hara's *The Philosophy of Punk* (1999), inevitably create a distorted, uni-dimensional image of punk. Punk bands exist across the political spectrum: from anarcho-punk collectives to fascist hardcore bands. It is certainly true that many of the original bands coming out of the London scene had a progressive leftist bent. In *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*, Greil Marcus connects punk to the Situationist International (originally Lettrist International), a group of avant-garde revolutionaries best known for their activities in the French revolt of May 1968 when they spay-painted their poetic revolutionary slogans on the walls of Paris (Marcus 1989). But conservative and neo-Nazi voices have also been prominent in punk rock (e.g., Skrewdriver, Brutal Attack, White Pride, the Dictators), as well as markedly apolitical groups and scenes (e.g., much of the current so-called "emo" scene). While anarchism has historically been a pronounced feature for some individuals within the punk field (as evidenced by various anarcho-punk collectives across the globe), one can also find examples of homophobia, racism and sexism in other articulations of punk. Indeed, the energy produced by the fusion of audience and artist heralded in punk's disalienation can be creative or destructive, depending on the message consumed. Witness the seduction of neo-fascism found in numerous punk scenes across the globe. My argument here is that punk offers the possibility for activism where other musical genres and cultural fields may only passively communicate dissent. I will return

to this argument in the latter part of the essay.

Punk as international communication

I began with the observation that punk, like other musical genres, represents a form of global communication. Ideas, emotions, symbols, and such are communicated via the medium. One of the elements that originally made punk significant was that it represented not just a form of musical expression, but a disposition and an attitude. In Dick Hebdige's discussion of punk rock as a subculture and a style, he makes the observation that "Subcultures represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media" (Hebdige 1979:90). Within the highly mediated world of the past several decades, punk provides resources for the disruption of the orderly sequence involved in the communication of dominant social ideas and practices. It can disrupt the authorized codes through which the social world is organized and experienced. One only has to note the repressive force employed to combat the popular rise of punk rock in London to realize that punk represented a real threat to the established order. For example, shows by the Sex Pistols were cancelled and the band banned. Their sarcastic single "God Save the Queen," released to coincide with Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee, was boycotted by radio stations and retail outlets. An outdoor concert aboard a boat on the River Thames was met with excessive police violence. When the single reached number one during Jubilee week (largely due to the controversy surrounding the band and the single), the sales chart contained only a blacked-out song title and group name in the top chart position (Savage 1992: 261-7).[5]

[5] For a more contemporary example, a recent tour of Latin America by NOFX (discussed

Yet threatening cultural fields like punk can often be commodified and contained over time. Social cohesion is maintained through the appropriation and redefinition of cultures of resistance. As Hebdige notes, "As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasing apparent. Eventually, the mods, the punks, the glitter rockers can be incorporated, brought back into line, located on the preferred 'map of problematic social reality'" (Hebdige 1979: 93-4). It is through the continual process of recuperation that the dominant social order is repaired and its social power reasserted. Drawing from the work of Roland Barthes (1972), Hebdige notes that "The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms: (1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e., the commodity form); (2) the 'labelling' and re-definition of deviant behaviours by dominant groups – the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)" (Hebdige 1979: 94).

With regards to the first move of commodification, numerous examples abound to illustrate the commodification of punk style and fashion, and exemplified by the fact that the "brain" behind the Sex Pistols was manager Malcolm Maclaren who envisioned the band to be both a commodity and tactic of promoting his own fashion business. Within a few years of its emergence as a subculture in London and New York, one could buy "punk" fashion and accessories in shopping malls across the US. The subcultural signs of punk continue to be incorporated into the dominant consumer culture today: from the "punk" sounds of contemporary corporate music to the marketing of "punk"

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later in the essay) met with tremendous police repression in Mexico and Peru (www.nofxofficialwebsite.com).

merchandise, such as the popular line of punk Bratz dolls (tag line: “the *only* girls with a passion for fashion”).

With regards to the ideological form of the process of recuperation, Hebdige (again drawing upon Barthes) argues: “Two basic strategies have been evolved for dealing with this threat. First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied (‘Otherness is reduced to sameness’). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a ‘pure object, a spectacle, a clown.’ In this case, the difference is consigned to a place beyond analysis” (Hebdige 1979: 97). Again, there are numerous examples of the transformation of punk into meaningless exotica: the Bratz example above, the marketing of “punk” costumes for Halloween, and so forth. One could argue that the appropriation of punk bands, styles, symbols, and sounds by the corporate music industry is evidence of the domestication of punk rock.

But it would be a mistake to simply assume that the commodification and domestication of punk bands, signs, and symbols has nullified the cultural field’s potential to disturb and disrupt established social orders. The example of the band Green Day is illustrative of the complicated moves under discussion here. Emerging from the San Francisco scene, Green Day left the venerable Lookout! independent record label to sign with a major label. Their first major label release, *Dookie*, was a phenomenal commercial success. Many from the Bay area scene that nurtured them quickly called Green Day sell-outs and actively distanced themselves from the band. Many punks who had been attracted to their two indie releases dismissed Green Day, claiming that they had forsaken their punk credibility. Yet, at the same time, numerous youths in America

were suddenly exposed to a band and style that they would not have been aware of before. Many used Green Day as a stepping stone to explore their former indie label contemporaries like Rancid, Bad Religion and the defunct Operation Ivy (in much the same way the major label releases of the Clash helped turn me onto other punk bands twenty years earlier). The complicated positions that Green Day occupy in punk, corporate music, and systems of global communication is evidenced by their global tour for their album *American Idiot*. The album is a pointed political critique of the George W. Bush administration and contemporary American life, and the band combined their performances with calls for political action and involvement among the audiences. Moreover, the band would regularly pull members of the audience on stage, hand them instruments, teach them a few chords, and have them join the band in a cover of Operation Ivy's anti-war song "Unity." Yet, the fact remains that Green Day performed these political acts of resistance, disalienation, and DIY to large stadiums full of audiences that could afford the high price of the tickets. Rather than getting into a discussion of whether or not bands like Green Day actually qualify as punk (or being punk enough), I am more interested in highlighting the ways in which punk continues to offer the possibility for counter-hegemonic communication in the face of commodification, appropriation and domestication.

One of the strongest examples of punk as a form of counter-hegemonic communication is the frequent reliance by punks on informal, decentralized networks. While the corporate music industry has co-opted and appropriated elements of an idealized punk scene, the global punk scene is typified by the flow of records, tapes, CDs, fanzines and bands outside the hegemonic control of the corporate music industry. For

example, the punk scene in Washington DC emerged in the late 1970s via records and magazines articles about the punk scene in New York and London. Visits by touring bands from outside DC, often playing in spaces outside the established club scene, strengthened the emergence of a local punk community. The creation and evolution of this vital scene has been documented in the excellent book *Dance of Days* (Anderson and Jenkins 2001). While clearly not as active or influential, the emergence of a punk scene in my hometown followed a similar trajectory: relying on informal social networks and the flow of goods and people operating outside established channels of communication. Across Europe, punk scenes are sustained by an important social network of squats (Katsiaficas 1997). And in Mexico City, the vibrant punk scene is organized by several anarcho-punk collectives (O'Connor 2004: 176).

One of the most important elements that connects and nurtures these social networks is the touring band. Growing up in Jacksonville, the touring band brought new ideas and musical forms, as well as tapes, zines and connections from other punk scenes. The DC punk scene was sparked by live shows from touring bands from the UK (namely the Damned), New York (the Ramones) and elsewhere (the Cramps) (see Anderson and Jenkins 2001). O'Connor notes the importance of Spanish punk bands touring in Mexico (2004: 179-182). In many cases, touring punk bands perform at low-priced shows in non-commercial venues. This allows them to avoid the commercial music industry, while making live shows relatively accessible to all. Touring bands often provide bridges between social networks and act as conduits for ideas, styles and other aspects of communication between national and international punk scenes.

These scenes are frequently nurtured by independent record labels and stores, as

well as the DIY ethos of bands recording and releasing music on their own (bands on tour will often record and release their own cassettes or CDs at low cost). In the case of Washington DC, the scene has been strengthened by the existence of indie label Dischord Records, which is run by Jeff Nelson and Ian MacKaye. Numerous bands have chosen to create their own independent record labels, to either support a local music scene or help other bands. For example, Alternative Tentacles, created by Jello Biafra of the Dead Kennedys, is the second-longest-running independent record label in American punk history after Bomp Records. Many of these indie punk labels reflect a DIY ethos and hostility to the mainstream. As Pat Thetic of Anti-Flag notes, “We released a record with a record company that fucked us over, and we were like ‘Screw this, we can do it ourselves’” (interview, 12 May 2005). The result was the creation of AF Records. Independent labels have been one of the hallmarks of punk rock’s success as they have led to a degree of freedom from the dictates of the corporate music industry. As Pat Thetic states, “We have bands [on AF Records] that have ideas that nobody else would allow to put records out and get those ideas out to other people. That’s an amazing thing” (interview, 12 May 2005). For many, punk’s symbiotic relationship with indies is one of it’s most pronounced features characteristics, and is reflective of its anti-status quo disposition. As Ruth Schwartz, the head of Mordam Records, asserted “What independent music is about, is anger against major labels and the music business [on] all levels. … I think my job is to be a part of the support system for artists to freely express themselves and to express an alternative point of view that they are not necessarily going to be able to express through a big major multimedia corporation in this country – either orally or aurally” (Schwartz in Sinker 2001: 115-116).

Yet, whether bands should sign to major record labels is a hotly contested debate within punk communities. The anarchist musical collective Chumbawamba scored a major commercial hit after signing to EMI in Europe and Universal in the US – after being dropped by their indie label. Defending his band's decision to sign with the majors, Boff argued "We know what we are doing. It is not as if we are naïve. We understand the relationship between band and label. We are trying to use them to sell whatever message we have and the music we make, and they use that to make a profit. That's fine and we accept that. If they are good at getting our records widely distributed, we acknowledge their role. If I thought we could do that on our own record label and have complete control, we would, but we can't" (Boff in Sinker 2001: 128). In part, the defense is about making money that can be used for various causes. Boff pointed out that "when we are offered forty thousand dollars for thirty seconds of music every day for four weeks [for a commercial], then what we do is give that money to an anti-fascist organization, social center, or community group" (Boff in Sinker 2001: 126). He continued, "for us to turn down that type of money [from Renault for a car commercial] when people in Italian anarchist centers and social community centers are so short of money and getting economically hammered by the state…[would be self-defeating]" (Boff in Sinker 2001: 127).

Yet, Steve Albini, producer and member of punk bands Big Black and Shellac, has argued that "The ugly truth and the thing that everybody seems to be living in denial of is that the great majority of bands that sign to major labels not only sell fewer records than they did in their independent lives, but they make less money. … Historically these things have proven themselves true: People who get involved with major labels make less

interesting music; they end up suffering personally, and as a band, aesthetically" (Albini in Sinker 2001: 137-8). As Ian MacKaye noted, "When a band signs to a major label, no matter how good a contract they think that have, no matter how much control they think their contract provides, it's unavoidable that you are conscious of being an investment. Somebody puts money into you and you have to pay it off somehow. And you *want* to pay off" (MacKaye in Sinker 2001: 20).

The other argument made in defense of signing to major labels is the increased exposure the bands get, and thus their increased ability to get their message to larger audiences. In an interview, Chumbawamba's Boff noted "If we hadn't signed that piece of paper with Universal, we wouldn't be having this conversation with you. Our whole thing is about communication" (Boff in Sinker 2001: 128). Jello Biafra likewise noted the increased clout bands can exploit when signing to major labels. Speaking of Green Day's high-profile benefit for Food Not Bombs: "They raised $50,000. I don't think a small underground show would have benefited Food Not Bombs as much. They would raise $400 or $500 bucks and everybody would feel good in the end, but Food Not Bombs could spend that money in half a day trying to feed homeless people" (Biafra in Sinker 2001: 41). As Anti-Flag's Pat Thetic notes, "You have to use that system [global capitalist economy]. Obviously it's cliché but you have to at least be able to have a voice to say this is fucked up, rather than to have no voice and scream in the wilderness and nobody hears you" (interview, 12 May 2005). While the issue is certainly complex, my own personal history of being turned on to punk via such major label bands as the Clash supports the claim that major labels can help bands with political messages speak to larger audiences than they might otherwise. The experience of punk rock suggests that

the divide between cooptation and counter-hegemony is often a blurry space rife with contradictions.

In addition to indie labels and social networks, the internet has proven to be an important tool for punks engaged in global communication, and it has provided them with new resources for counter-hegemonic expression. Many punks have e-mail accounts by which they communicate with other punks and punk scenes, sometimes via international punk sites and chat rooms. Punk bands and independent labels often have their own web sites where they can communicate directly to an online global audience, as well as distribute their music and merchandise. Sites like www.worldwidepunk.com, www.byofl.org, and other international punk sites have helped connect individuals and communities. Sites like www.MySpace.com and www.archive.org have allowed bands to distribute their music inexpensively and widely, bypassing the need for record labels and distribution deals.

The internet has been an important development for punk rock and global communication in general. It has also helped generated useful debates concerning changes in global flows of information. For example, Arjun Appadurai (1996) has offered an influential portrayal of cultural globalization, focusing on the decentralized flow of people, technology, capital, media and ideas around the globe. He has argued that electronic media "transform the field of mass mediation because they offer new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds" (Appadurai 1996: 3). For Appadurai, and other likeminded theorists of globalization, we are currently experiencing transformative shifts in global technology and communication that produce new opportunities for empowerment and resistance,

especially in the face of economic neoliberalism. Viewed from this perspective, one could argue that the reliance of many punks on decentered networks and punk's general commitment to disalienation make it an ideal mechanism for counter-hegemony in the emerging "mediascapes" of contemporary global communication.

Alan O'Connor, however, has offered a far more nuanced view of global flows of ideas and information in the globalized world. Through his multi-sited ethnographic work on punk communities, O'Connor rejects what he regards as Appadurai's embrace of a virtual "chaos theory" of global communication, arguing instead for the importance of *habitus* (O'Connor 2004 and 2002). As he notes "the flow of media, ideas and people between these [punk] scenes is *socially organized* … In particular, these flows of records and tapes, fanzines and visitors are unequal and unbalanced. Notions of center and periphery are still valid" (O'Connor 2004: 175-6). The US punk scene, for instance, dominates the global punk field because of the economic resources it can command. European scenes exist in a semi-peripheral position, and those in the Third World are clearly on the periphery. For example, O'Connor documents the limited flow of punk bands and goods from Spain to Mexico, but notes "I don't know of any Mexican punk group that has toured in Spain. The reasons are economic" (O'Connor 2004: 181).[6] This insight is important for it underscores the need to resist utopian claims regarding neoliberal globalization and the promise of "free" global flows of ideas, goods and people. The "mediascapes" of contemporary global politics are characterized by inequalities and gross disparities. The example of punk rock illustrates that aspect of contemporary global communication.

[6] The Mexican band Tijuana No! did tour Spain and released a 2000 live album recorded in Balboa, but O'Connor's general point is important nonetheless.

At the same time, punk rock is illustrative of what many identify as "cultural hybridity" in contemporary global politics. Local scenes develop around their own social resources and political needs. As O'Connor notes, "I find that punk subculture is selectively accepted in Mexico according to the needs of marginalized Mexican youth" (O'Connor 2004: 178). The same can be said for local scenes in the US, UK and elsewhere. For example, the scene that developed in DC reflected both the socio-economic structures in place and the needs of the youth at that historic moment (see Anderson and Jenkins 2001). Discussing the uniqueness of various punk scenes, Steve Albini noted "it's unavoidable that there will be a regional flavor to music. … Ian [MacKaye] described it in terms of a regional accent" (Albini in Sinker 2001: 147). But Albini went on to argue that "Now that there's a much broader dissemination of information, these regional scenes don't necessarily have geographical boundaries. They have philosophical boundaries instead. For example, there'll be a really strong thread of continuity between all of the vegan hardcore or vegan metal crossover bands. Like the ska bands from Alaska to Hawaii will all have certain things in common" (Albini in Sinker 2001: 147). While Albini is correct in noting the influence of global flows of communication, it is important to examine the ways in which local scenes shape a subculture in ways that it makes sense for their situation. O'Connor notes that Mexican punks created a scene and music forms that served their needs. Mexican punk bands sang songs that reflected their local struggles and concerns. Likewise, punks across Latin America, North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia create scenes and songs that reflect their own particular needs. Importantly, punks in those scenes are usually employing punk rock as a tool against their repressive regimes and social structures, thus there is far

more at stake in the expression of a punk subculture at the periphery than there is at the core.[7]

Taking O'Connor's arguments seriously leaves us with a more nuanced vision of punk as a form of global communication. But it is my argument that punk is attractive to local youths across the globe as a form of personal and political expression because the punk field offers resources for agency and empowerment via disalienation, a DIY ethos, and an anti-status quo disposition. It is a musical form that is readily available for local youths to employ in their articulation of their domestic needs and struggles. As Pat Thetic notes, "The amazing thing about punk rock is that every city, every group of ten kids, defines it for themselves. Punk rock is … if you don't see something that you like, create it" (interview, 12 May 2005). In short, the punk field offers resources for the "voiceless" to express their voice. Ethnographic work suggests that punk is one of the many sonic soundtracks of the subaltern, alongside reggae, hip hop and heavy metal. It provides readily-available resources for the articulation of resistance and the construction of hybridity in the face of neo-liberal capitalist globalization.

Punk communicated internationally

In a recent conversation, Ray McKelvey (aka Stevie Ray Stiletto, the front-man for Stevie Stiletto) claimed that he wasn't "smart enough" to sing about politics and claimed that his music was decidedly apolitical (interview, 12 June 2006). This was clearly a self-effacing comment given that it is hard to characterize music that speaks to police brutality ("Night of the Cops") and imagines the possible assassination of the

[7] These observations about punk scenes in North African and the Middle East have been informed by personal conversations with Mark LeVine. For a discussion of the political role of popular music in the region see LeVine 2005, esp. chapter 6.

president ("Taco Stand") as strictly apolitical. But McKelvey's point is well-taken. I noted earlier that it would be a mistake to assume the existence of a universal politics of punk, but I suggested that punk offers the possibility for activism while other genres may only passively communicate dissent. While numerous punk bands have overt political stances, Stevie Stiletto, like numerous other punk bands, tend to focus on aspects of daily life. But yet, doing so – and more importantly, how they do so – is still a political move, especially given that the personal is political. While there are no "punk politics" *per se*, punk can produce a disposition that is inherently political in nature. Returning to my earlier observation that the punk field is often typified by its critical disposition to the status quo, DIY ethos, and a dedication to disalientaion, I argue that punk always provides valuable resources for political engagement. Regardless of the message in the music, punk constitutes an intervention that is always political.

While I do not want to reduce the cultural field of punk down to its sonic effect, i.e., the music, I do want to suggest that even the most innocuous punk song can carry a political message. For example, numerous punk bands have written about the boredom and dissatisfaction of youth culture.[8] Black Flag, for instance, sang about having a "TV Party" because "We've got nothing better to do/than watch TV and have a couple of brews." Likewise, Stevie Stiletto sang about the boredom of life in a conservative southern US town in "Nothing Ever Happens in This Town." While Black Flag's rant was clearly sarcastic ("TV news shows what it's really like out there/It's a scare!/You can go out if you want/I wouldn't dare!"), both songs contained (both lyrically and aurally) a

[8] Punk youth culture, especially in the US, is often portrayed as largely white, male, heterosexual and middle class. This image, however, is a misleading caricature, as evidenced by the numerous women, queer, and non-white bands and participants in the American scene, to say nothing of the non-Western punk scenes.

rebuttal to dissatisfaction and alienation: pick up an instrument and make some noise! And as noted earlier, that noise can represent a powerful disruption in the authorizing codes of the established social order.

In his study of punk politics, however, Ryan Moore (2004) asserts that there needs to be more than this. He argues that punk's "symbolic mockery and independent culture must both be informed by an alternative, utopian vision which looks to the way society could and should be organized as a point of departure for its criticism of the alienation and dehumanization inflicted in late capitalist society" (Moore 2004: 325). What Moore desires is a grand narrative, a common center upon which punk can articulate a universal politics. But I argue that the ethos that permeates much of the punk cultural field eschews grand narratives, especially of the "hippy" utopian variety. The DIY ethos and anarchistic sympathies within punk provide for the articulation of a politics that are local and contingent; micro-responses rather than meta-theory. The power of punk rock is that it encourages its audiences to become active forces for articulating their own critiques and responses to the politics of daily life. While some bands have focused on addressing global political concerns, other bands have focus on local issues, while others have been more concerned with personal politics.

To illustrate this point, let me offer a few examples of punks' involvement in formal politics. Take, for example, San Francisco-based NOFX. While mocking overtly political punk bands ("The Cause"), NOFX has always articulated a critique of conservative American culture. That critique became more pronounced prior to the 2004 American presidential election. The band released a scathing critique of the Bush administration with their *American Errorist* CD, and their frontman Fat Mike organized

two compilation albums called *Rock Against Bush*, *vols. 1* and *2* on his Fat Wreck Chords label. These compilations were part of a larger initiative spearheaded by Fat Mike: punkvoter.com. The ultimate goal of this project (which included a national tour of numerous punk bands) was to educate, register and mobilize over 500,000 punks to be an electoral force. As the website stated: "We plan to use this election as a way to get our fans engaged in politics and evolve our movement into becoming involved locally to affect real change nationally" (www.punkvoter.com). The project was explicit in linking punk and politics: "Punk rock has always been on the edge and in the forefront of politics. It is time to energize the majority of today's disenfranchised youth movement and punk rockers to make change a reality… This is our way to talk about new laws and scenarios that could change our quality of life for years to come. Punkvoter is your organization. It will be run with the same energy and spirit of all punk efforts. With your help we will be a credible force to truly shape the future of our nation" (www.punkvoter.com).

While few punk bands reach the level of organizational intervention that NOFX has with the punkvoter.com project, one can see across the globe that punks are articulating local problems from local perspectives. Speaking on the existence of punk collectives in Mexico, a member of the Spanish anarcho-punk ban Sin Dios stated: "For them the word punk is a synonym of struggle and commitment. In their collectives they not only organize concerts and promote punk music but have their own workshops for study, analysis and political education. As well they participate in social mobilizations" (quoted in O'Connor 2004: 186). Using decentralized social networks and a DIY ethos, punks have coordinated political actions locally and internationally. Anarcho-punk

movements have resilient bonds that stretch across the globe (see O'Connor 2003). Punks have been at the forefront of anti-globalization movements and protests globally and locally. But, recalling that there is nothing inherently progressive about the politics of punks, it should be noted that punks have also been active in far-right political circles as well, from nationalist/neo-fascist movements in the former Soviet Union to racist hate groups in the UK and US.

The key issue is that, across the globe, from Latin America to North Africa and the Middle East to China and Indonesia, many youths frustrated with the social and political repression of contemporary life turn to punk rock, as well as musical genres such as hip hop and heavy metal (see LeVine 2005, Davies 2005, www.worldwidepunk.com). These individuals and groups utilize the resources of the punk cultural field for agency and empowerment within international relations. Agency for these punks can be expressed not just locally, but regionally and globally as well. As discussed above, the punk field provides resources for individuals and decentralized groups for global communication outside hegemonic control. Granted, these communication flows of ideas, signs, symbols, and sounds are uneven, with the global North enjoying a privileged position. But while most global punks often borrow styles and ideas from the US and European punk scenes, they do so to create their own scenes and styles. In Morocco youths can hear several pirate punk radio stations broadcasting from Spain, and these have nurtured a small but active local punk scene. Often, there are intra-South flows of ideas and sounds, as scenes connect with each other. While some observers occasionally bemoan the "apolitical" nature of some punk rock scenes, often those critiques operate from a simplistic framework of understanding what can be considered political.[9] In many

[9] As noted above, even "apolitical" punk songs as Black Flag's "TV Party" can often be

scenes, for example, punks find it difficult to be overtly political given the fear of state repression. But in these societies, the mere expression of punk rock can be regarded as a political act in itself, much more so than it may be in less-repressive Western political contexts. Many punks in Latin America, North Africa and the Middle East face state repression merely by looking "punk." Indeed, it could be argued that what makes punk "inherently" political is the way it is seen and heard by the state and the political and social machines against which it rages.

There are several points to underscore here. For the past three decades, punk rock has functioned as a medium of global communication and, often, political resistance. Given its frequent reliance on decentered social networks and independent flows (e.g., indie labels, self-managed tours, internet exchanges), those messages are often less inhibited by the global capitalist system or corporate interests. But more than being a possible medium for counter-hegemonic communication, punk is a message in its own right. In a nutshell, that message is this: the world is fucked up, and you can and should do something about it.

Conclusion: Punk IR

I am increasingly concerned about the ways that IR as a discipline is unable to communicate to everyday citizens about issues of tremendous importance. I am repeatedly struck by our inability to speak to the people whose lives are affected daily by the issues we are supposed to be studying. More importantly, I am struck by how irrelevant we and our work can seem for the world's population.

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regarded as important interventions in the politics of the personal.

In 2003, I grappled quite openly and vocally with this alienation. The annual International Studies Conference was being help in Portland, OR that year. Throughout the hallowed halls of the soul-numbing conference hotel, the discipline of IR was displaying its strengths and weaknesses. The world was on the verge of witnessing the George W. Bush administration's invasion of Iraq, backed with their "coalition of the willing." But within the ISA, there was little attempt to grapple with what this meant. My few attempts to stage some form of protest and intellectual outrage proved heart-warming but ineffectual. Then, at the end of the week, I went to a punk club a few blocks from the hotel to see a Joe Strummer tribute show. Joe Strummer, the frontman for the Clash, had died suddenly a few months before, and now over twenty bands from all over the region were coming together to play a benefit show. Each band performed two or three Clash songs; one band getting up after the other, sharing amps and a drum set. On stage, the bands were using the songs to make sense of the dangerous world we all found ourselves in. The in-between song banter reflected this – comments about President George W. Bush, remarks about American fascism, concerns about the impending war on Iraq, and pleas to register to vote. The kids in the club were using the Clash and punk rock, much as I did years before, to help them understand the world they were inheriting. Down the street, the discipline of IR pontificated to itself about world affairs. As I swirled amongst them in the mosh pit, I wondered - what relevance did I and the ISA have to these kids? It seemed to me that we as a discipline had fuck all to offer the people outside that conference hotel.

That experience in Portland has turned out to be as transformative for me as the time I first heard the Bad Brains single "Sailing On." My first attempt to write about

Portland was published in an edited volume on music and international relations (Dunn 2005). But I have become increasingly convinced that punk rock can provide a mechanism for discussing world affairs that moves beyond the limitations of IR. The problem is that academia has had the effect of alienating me from the world that I am trying to understand. It has done this by decrying emotions and passion. Matt Davies notes this when he observes: "Scholarly writing in particular relies on the writer's ability to be an authority of a particular kind: one who can stand back (even if one is a participant observer) and communicate authoritatively and coolly. To write with anger is not a strategy likely to get one published or promoted" (Davies 2005: 138). There is clearly a danger in subscribing to a heroic narrative of punk, with the image of an individual raging against the forces of a repressive establishment, particularly as it hides within it the possibility of romanticizing action and violence, with all the problems such a move entails. But I am increasingly convinced that anger and passion are exactly what are needed when discussing world affairs. As a punk, I had those things in spades. But my education, graduate training, and professional career have been instrumental in stamping those elements out of me and out of my detached scholarly writing. In order to communicate to the people I want to communicate with, I need to get those emotions and passions back. As the Clash taught me many years ago: "Let fury have the hour, anger can be power/You know that you can use it." I need to be able to communicate with anger and emotion. The scholarly discipline of IR doesn't provide me the tools to do that, but punk rock does. Because the punks are right: the world is fucked up, and we need to do something about it.

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