

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the Legacy of Crass and Anarcho-punk

On Friday 28th June 2013, Oxford Brookes' Popular Music Research Unit (PMRU) hosted a retrospective event looking at the legacy of Crass and the 'anarcho-punk' scene in the Willow and Richard Hamilton buildings at the Headington Hill Campus. In addition to a wide range of talks on the subject, a display of anarcho-punk graphics (record sleeves, gig posters, fanzines and more) was presented by Russ Bestley (Principal Lecturer at the London College of Communication (LCC)).

Funded by PMRU and presented in association with the new Punk Scholars Network (PSN) and the LCC, the event brought together around fifty attendees including many non-academics who were simply interested in the topic as well as, naturally, a range of students and scholars working in and around the punk field. Most notable amongst the latter was invited speaker Professor George McKay of Salford University, author of *Senseless Acts of Beauty* and other texts exploring 'cultures of resistance' such as anarcho-punk. Another invited speaker was Penny Rimbaud, former drummer of Crass and outspoken proponent of the band's guiding philosophy, namely the anarchistic principle that 'there is no authority but yourself'.

In addition to the panel of invited speakers were two panels of papers from members of the PSN. The first of these began with a paper from Rich Cross entitled ' "You'll never beat the system by bombing Number 10": Perceptions of the utility of political violence in anarcho-punk, 1977-1987' in which Cross explored the growing tensions within anarcho-punk about the culture's adherence to pacifism and nonviolence in a context of growing political militancy. He suggested that the contention that anarcho-punk remained synonymous with 'peace punk' was misplaced, and argued that the question of the utility of political violence became a strongly contested idea within the culture. After 1983, he concluded, a principled commitment to pacifism was no longer definitional to anarcho-punk's political identity.

This was followed by Jim Donaghey (a PhD student from Loughborough University) with a paper entitled 'Rudolf (is a punk) Rocker: Anarchism as a politics of punk/Punk as a culture of resistance'. Donaghey sought to challenge the binary model of anarchist activism, in which 'lifestylists' and 'workerists' stand in polar opposition to one another. He argued instead that there were numerous crossovers between the cultural production of the punk counter-culture and the conduct of anti-capitalist struggles in other contexts. Similarly to Rich Cross, Donaghey was keen to offer something of a counter-challenge to the activists who have been quick to criticise the politics of ostensibly anarchist punk bands such as Crass: focussing on statements from and complaints against the punk-affiliated Crimethinc collective, Donaghey argued that punk in general and anarcho-punk in particular *can* be understood as a meaningful culture of resistance.

After a vegetarian free lunch provided courtesy of PMRU, the second panel affiliated to the PSN involved three further papers. First, Matt Grimes (Senior Lecturer in Music Industries and Radio at Birmingham City University) offered a paper titled 'Call it Crass but "There Is No Authority But Yourself": De-canonizing Punk's Underbelly'. Grimes discussed the documentary on Crass ('There is no authority...', 2006) directed by Alexander Oey, drawing attention to Oey's challenges to the classic 'rock narrative' found in documentaries such as the BBC's popular *Britannia* series. By focussing upon the years *after* the protagonist's years of music-making (very much including the present), Grimes argued that Oey undercuts the more typical documentarian's focus upon some heroic and strictly delimited moment of cultural or political significance: instead, 'There Is No Authority But Yourself' promotes the importance of Crass's importance as much for the way they have attempted to live out their ideals as for their active period as a band.

The second paper of the first afternoon panel was presented by Ana Raposa (a graphic designer and teacher who recently completed her PhD at Central St. Martin's College of Art and Design in London) with the title 'Punk is dead, long live punk!: The representation of politics in anarcho-

punk music graphics'. A very wide range of graphics was displayed from differing groups from the anarcho-punk scene and related milieu, with a focus upon groups which have toyed with or mocked extreme right wing variants of punk such as AYS, the Apostles and Skin Disease (Chumbawamba in disguise). In response to Raposa's paper, the expert knowledge of the conference attendees came in to its own with questions from the floor clarifying details of particular cassette releases dating back thirty years or so. For others, doubtless, the graphics from such obscure releases were unfamiliar but Raposa's detailed presentation seemed to manage to offer something of interest to all.

Third amongst this panel was Pete Dale (Early Career Fellow at Oxford Brookes and convener of the *No Sir, I Won't* event) with a paper titled 'More Than Music?: Confusions of musical style and political attitude in anarcho-punk from Crass onwards'. Primarily based upon quotes from bands within the early 1980s anarcho-punk movement, the UK hardcore scene of the late 1980s and related scenes from the 1990s, Dale's presentation attempted to use Ian Glasper's books on the aforementioned scenes as effective 'oral history' source material: many individuals seem to have claimed punk as 'more than music', yet certain contradictions can be observed between the differing accounts as to what this 'more than music' element consists of.

After a short break, the final panel of the day began with a presentation from George McKay. Fresh from presenting at a conference on jazz in Paris, McKay pointed out that it had taken several decades after the hey day of jazz for the best scholarship on such music to get produced: something similar might be happening with punk, he went on to suggest. McKay's talk was principally based on letters he had received from Crass in the heyday of anarcho-punk. Sat next to Penny Rimbaud of Crass, he read out the letters in full, remarking at one point that the original letter which he had written to provoke the response he was reading us must have challenged them on some ideological point or other although, 30 or so years later, he was at a loss to recall what that point was. Such unsurprisingly lost memories did not in the least bit hinder the interest to be found in the detail of the letters, however, and McKay's accompanying observations from the contemporary vantage point were equally valuable. Even the fact that the world-leading scholar of 'cultures of resistance' had, latterly, turned to writing about gardening seemed relevant in the context of a symposium on punk: a good deal of former punk's have turned to allotment holding, permaculture and such like in their later years, after all, with Penny Rimbaud (who appeared to be listening with interest to McKay's talk) being a case in point.

The next panellist was a non-academic individual, Sarah McHendry (former drummer of all-female punk bands such as Curse of Eve and Witchknot and longterm promoter and 'fan' of punk). Her talk was structured around a series of photographs from different periods of her life, starting with a picture of her teenage bedroom in the late 70s with a Crass poster prominently displayed behind her. Having been invited to speak precisely to give the symposium a perspective on Crass/anarcho-punk beyond that of the academics and famous bands, McHendry revealed that attitudes towards women in punk had been one of her longest irritations with 'the scene': she recalled, for example, that when she had been part of a collective promoting punk gigs in Telford in the early 80s, many male punks would refer to the females as such-and-such's 'bird', not even bothering to dignify them with a name. It was unsurprising, given such concerns, to hear that when the 'riot grrrrl' movement erupted in the early 1990s she had felt 'as though all my Christmas's had come at once'.

The final speaker of the day was none other than Penny Rimbaud, who had been in attendance for the whole day and had offered critical comments to most of the papers. Such a critical stance is typical of Rimbaud, a man who always seems to be ready with a contentious viewpoint on any given subject. Rimbaud has made clear on several occasions his acute wariness about the engagement of academics with the practice of the writing of punk history, apparently fearful that their involvement may retrospectively taint or distort the legacy of punk rebellion (in the same way that crass [sic] music journalists attempted to do when Crass were active). It is a reticence which discounts the fact that so many academic punk researchers are former (or current) punk musicians, activists and organizers rather than intellectual interlopers descending from arid ivory towers.

Rimbaud's sense that Crass were being scrutinized by 'others' led to a few tense exchanges and perhaps encouraged a desire to accentuate difference and disagreement ahead of common agreement.

His first remark, as he began an initial monologue which lasted for close to half an hour, was that he been interested in the preceding talks but remained slightly concerned that an over-romanticisation might be coming into play: 'anarcho-punk', after all, was a *post hoc* coinage which somewhat belies the fact that Crass, Rimbaud's own band which had been at the centre of the day's symposium, were far more interested in 'empowerment' than in music. Amongst many challenging observations, as he went on, was a firm focus on 'great' art, philosophy and literature as opposed to the 'frankly awful' music which generally came out of the punk scene: given the context, namely an audience of punk enthusiasts, this was a typically provocative gesture which became the focus of many of the subsequent questions from the floor. One attendee impatiently enquired as to why Rimbaud had to be 'so negative about everything': his response, reasonably enough, was that an academic conference seemed like the appropriate place to ask searching questions. Possibly the most intriguing observation to come from the septuagenarian agitator was that he was not satisfied with being 'Penny from Crass' and thus, implicitly, that he hoped to do more yet.

Given that, amongst other provocations of what Crass used to call 'the system', his group had indirectly caused embarrassing questions to be asked of Prime Minister Thatcher in the House of Commons with regards to the Falklands War, one might have expected Rimbaud to insist that Crass's successes be celebrated. Instead, however, his greatest pride appeared to be the fact that 'I bake fucking good bread'. This, as a challenge to the most facile understandings of punk's commonly voiced claim that 'anyone can do it', seemed a suprisingly valuable remark: the anti-elitism which had been 'an off-shoot of DIY punk' risked ignoring the contributions of the likes of Nietzsche and Brahms without whom, Rimbaud seemed to be saying, one couldn't have had Twentieth Century developments such as punk; whatever you do – playing music, baking bread, whatever – it should be done as well as you can, the ex-Crass member seemed to be hinting. It is doubtful that all attendees were satisfied with such provocative positivity with regard to 'elitism'. That said, no-one left the symposium without plenty of food for thought with regard to the legacies of Crass and anarcho-punk: this surely was the point and, therefore, thanks is due to all those who provided talks, who simply attended the event and, in particular, thanks is due to Oxford Brookes' PMRU for funding and hosting the event.

Extra thanks is due to Rich Cross for valuable input to this write-up of the day, and to Mike Dines and (again) Rich Cross for chairing panels.

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Cite the original version:

Pete Dale, 2014. 'Write up of the 'No Sir, I Won't: reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk' event at Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013, Popular Music Research Unit, Oxford Brookes University, <<http://arts.brookes.ac.uk/events/resources/No-Sir-I-wont-write-up.doc>>, accessed [access date].

Cite this version:

Pete Dale, 2014. 'Write up of the 'No Sir, I Won't: reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk' event at Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013, Popular Music Research Unit, Oxford Brookes University, republished on *The Hippies Now Wear Black* blog, <<http://thehippiesnowwearblack.wordpress.com/2014/07/07/detailed-write-up-of-the-no-sir-i-wont-symposium>> accessed [access date].