

Am I an Anarchist? A Tale of Anarcho Curiosity

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My first encounters with punk were similar to many others of my generation. Growing up in a small town in the middle of Kent, exposure to the revolutionary new phenomenon that was apparently all the rage in London in the summer of 1976 was limited to reading the shocking reports in my Mum and Dad's News Of The World. That, and the dramatic stories passed around like secret codes by a couple of the slightly older kids at school who read the Melody Maker and New Musical Express and therefore

considered themselves pretty up there with the latest musical developments that were apparently largely passing us by thirty miles away in the capital. As a fourteen year old, such snippets of information were certainly intriguing, especially combined with my Mum's outrage at what was happening to the youth of the country, but it was still something of a distant phenomenon. Obviously, some of that was set to change by the end of the year – the Ramones, Sex Pistols and the Damned released records for a start, and it became possible (though still a little difficult) to actually hear some of this stuff on the radio if you searched hard enough. Stuart Henry's Street Heat on Radio Luxembourg was something of a clandestine newsreel for me, though I wasn't

to discover John Peel until a little later. It's strange to think, with the benefit of hindsight and a modicum of maturity, that in fact our town was playing at least a small part in the birth of punk in the years and months leading up to the long hot summer of 1976 – Sid Vicious had lived two streets away from where I grew up, Joe Strummer visited friends in the town regularly during his 101ers days, at least one member of 999 lived locally, as did one of the Mark Perry's early collaborators on Sniffin' Glue, Rick Brown – credited in SG#1 as "Rick Brown from Tunbridge Wells (Kent's

answer to Detroit)." Even punk face Shane MacGowan, of Nipple Erectors and later Pogues fame, was born in the same hospital as me in the late 1950s – who knew our humble little town was so, well, rock 'n' roll?

Records were passed around our group of friends with an increasingly anorakish approach to subcultural style (and I don't just mean the future Undertones fans), though for many that still meant Genesis, Deep Purple, Queen, ELP or (God forbid) Yes would be doing the rounds rather than this exciting sounding but still rather distant 'punk' stuff. Chart success for punk artists during 1977 changed all that – the Stranglers were to become my own main attraction

and I pursued their releases with some vigour, and it soon became possible to see and hear other punk and new wave bands on Top Of The Pops (step forward X Ray Spex, Adverts, Saints, the Jam, the Stranglers, Generation X, Boomtown Rats, Skids, Elvis Costello, UK Subs, Siouxsie & the Banshees, Damned, Members, Eddie & the Hot Rods). Our local record shops were limited to the Rediffusion television rental and repair shop (which stocked a few chart singles), Boots the Chemist and a couple of established independents that were more concerned with prog rock than is strictly healthy and didn't exactly jump onto the punk bandwagon too quickly, despite the business potential. Luckily, at least the punk albums that had started making inroads into the charts were available in my Mum's Freemans mail order catalogue

and I could pay in weekly installments, so that became a source of vinyl news and information.

Anyway, I digress. What I'm driving at, I think, is the process by which I, and many others like me in small towns, villages (and, I would guess, cities) adopted the punk subculture and began to establish our own take on the complex system of codes and conventions within it. That meant making a lot of mistakes, being 'uncool' from time to time when we misread the rules and (anti)social etiquette, buying



records (and shirts, and trousers, and shoes...) that we would later regret and try to pretend had never existed, stumbling forward and growing up with a 'punk' identity. We weren't exactly sure whether we were supposed to swear and spit all the time, or just at punk gigs, or maybe in the park when we were hanging around being, you know, punks. Were we supposed to wear bondage trousers, leather jackets or swastikas? Was one local lad's predilection for dressing up in an original German SS officer's uniform a good idea (probably not)? There didn't seem to be anyone around to tell us the rules, and we were making them up as we went along. Pretending to be bored, 'rejecting authority' whatever that meant, a bit of petty vandalism, trying to find out the latest punk news and punk trends, nicking ethanol and chloroform from the school chemistry labs (for the purpose of drinking, sniffing and/or playing 'hilarious' tricks on others that would count as violent assault in any other context), it was all part of our regular day to day existence. Along with, in my case, going to school, working part time as a cleaner in the local hospital and delivering the football pools with my Dad and my brother (which at least covered the weekly installments on my growing punk rock record collection).

And then came anarcho punk. Obviously it wasn't actually called that at the time – it was just one of the many developments and fragmented spin-offs from the same root cause. New wave, post punk, hardcore, anarcho punk, new punk, real punk, oi!, progressive punk – whatever the journalists were trying to call these new genres, to all intents and purposes we all saw them as beneath the same broad umbrella that was 'punk'. I bought a few anarcho punk records – partly encouraged by the low prices I would think as much as the contents, since money was limited and I couldn't afford to buy too many each week. They weren't on coloured vinyl, which was a shame, so sometimes the latest release from X Ray Spex, UK Subs, the Lurkers, Generation X, the Dickies or whoever would take precedent for obvious reasons, but I had a few future anarcho 'classics' in the collection, some of which I even quite liked – Bloody Revolutions (and particularly Persons Unknown), Big A Little A... not as good as the Stranglers, or Dead Kennedys, or PiL, or Gang of Four, or Mekons, or Killing Joke, but not bad nonetheless. I left school in 1981 and moved to Portsmouth – supposedly to go to Polytechnic, having secured a last minute clearing place on a Mechanical Engineering course. It was an excuse to get away from

home, my twin brother had already got a place on his course (coincidentally also in Portsmouth), and we both got full maintenance grants from the government. Free money. I lasted less than two months at college. My excuse has always been that I didn't get on, and being taken to one side by one of the tutors to be told that my green hair and painted leather jacket was influencing other students to take drugs didn't really enamour me to the place. All true (the tutor's comments, not the drug dealing), but on reflection and with the benefit of hindsight, I was an awkward sod with an attitude problem and if I was in their shoes I wouldn't have been too happy either. Still, I got to blow my entire student grant on records, which was great until I ran out of food.

The transition to becoming an anarcho punk (in all but name) was, then, a subtle one. I had drifted into buying a few anarcho records, and I got to see a few of the bands who were beginning to make up this new strand of punk, but at the same time a lack of money, a slowly developing sense of personal politics and an increasing awareness of the wider world around me were shaping my identity. Certainly my engagement with the local Student Union in Portsmouth was a bit of an eye-opener. I got a 'job' as a humper for visiting bands (a bit like a roadie but far less glamorous), at the Poly and the bigger local venues – the Guildhall and Locarno; carrying amps, speakers and lighting rigs into the venue first thing in the morning then carrying it all back out again in the early hours of the next morning. I also learnt to DJ, becoming a regular fixture at the Friday night Alternative Disco that attracted many local (non-student) punks. The politics of the Student Union itself provided a steep learning curve – being publicly reprimanded for calling my brother a cunt provided an introduction to 'feminism', and the difficulties the SU management had with local National Front supporters provided a lesson in both the left and right of the political spectrum (and, to an extent, the problems therein on both sides of that great divide).

Portsmouth itself was also undergoing some radical changes. The city suffered from increasingly high levels of unemployment as Thatcher's economic policies hardened up, and the build-up and execution of the Falklands conflict was felt very, very close to home, since this was the home port for the Task Force and many families in the area were linked to the military. It was all very well taking a stand against this unjust war from the safety of your home town in the suburbs or out

in the sticks in the west country, it was another thing to face it in public in a city where it felt like 99% of the population had strong personal and political views in support of government action and where thousands would turn out at the harbour entrance to send the ships off and (hopefully) welcome them home. Local protest, then, was slightly muted by a fear for personal safety and the desire to avoid a good kicking.

Amidst all this, and following my ‘leaving’ college, I moved across the harbour to Gosport (which, for anyone who doesn’t know it, is kind of like a downmarket version of Portsmouth, if that doesn’t stretch the imagination too far) with my girlfriend, Cherry – who had dropped out from Art College around the same time. We set up house in a rundown rented terrace, complete with one single hot water tap from an electric heater in the kitchen and an outside toilet at the end of the garden. Now officially ‘unemployed’, we signed on – though we both continued to work at venues in Portsmouth humping equipment for cash in hand, and I carried on with my DJ stint at the Poly. Now justifiably (in our own minds, at least) part of the vast unemployed scrapheap caused directly by Thatcher and her nazi government (rather than through our own choice or stupidity, naturally), we could begin to legitimately take part in the anarchist punk scene on our own terms and our own merit. I became vegetarian, then vegan. I dyed all my clothes black. I got a puppy, a lunatic mongrel called Merlin, who proceeded to shit all over the house and eat anything that wasn’t nailed down or locked behind closed doors – carrier bags, loaves of bread, bags of sugar, socks, carpets, furniture. I would cynically go to sign on every two weeks knowing that hundreds of others just like me were doing exactly the same thing, all innocent victims of the oppressive capitalist state. Do they owe us a living? Of course they fucking do!

I went to loads of gigs – working at the local venues ensured a free pass to pretty much anything of interest, and knowing some of the road crews meant I could sometimes sneak in backstage after bunking the train up to London and hanging around in the pissing rain outside the Lyceum or wherever, knocking the door and insisting for the seventeenth time that Monty or Baz or whoever had promised to put me on the guest list when they played Portsmouth two weeks earlier. I followed Poison Girls around for a while, and saw the Mob, Zounds, Subhumans and others on the circuit, though my tastes were catholic – one week an anarcho

gig in a local community centre, the next the Stranglers at the Rainbow, Killing Joke at the Lyceum or Vice Squad at the Poly. And, still working on the local gig circuit, Motörhead, Saxon, Iron Maiden, Stiff Little Fingers, the Clash, Thin Lizzy, David Essex, Dr Hook, Chris De Burgh or the Nolans at the Guildhall. Some of those not strictly through choice, naturally.

My political ‘awakening’ happened slowly and erratically. I bought and listened to some of the new Crass Records releases, though some I enjoyed far more than others to be honest. I read the lengthy texts on some of the sleeves, along with fanzines picked up at gigs or sent with mail order records and tapes. I was interested enough to want to find out more, so I bought a copy of George Woodcock’s *The Anarchist Reader* to try to get my head around it all. Like the anarcho punk music itself, I found some of the essays intriguing and some entertaining, while others were dense, boring and unreadable. I’d grown up, in punk terms, with the Stranglers, X Ray Spex, Damned, Sex Pistols, Rezillos, Skids, Undertones, Wire and dozens of others who could construct a simple message and carry it across with a catchy tune. The anarcho punk bands that I liked carried on in that manner, marrying a bit of politics to a decent melody, and the anarchist or libertarian texts that I engaged with and understood were probably more in the tradition of the great writers and satirists (from Wilde to Orwell) than the turgid theory of Marx and his mates. My dalliance with anarchism was perhaps more tentative than others – less anarcho punk stalwart, more ‘anarcho curious’. That doesn’t mean that many of the core principles of this new form of popular/populist anarchism didn’t strike a chord – a sense of fairness and equality, respect toward other human beings, pacifism, a questioning of authority, direct action and self-assertion all seemed like pretty good ideas to me. In retrospect, I also recognise that those ‘values’ are pretty widespread beyond any kind of ‘anarchist’ identity – I remember having a long conversation with a nun on the London/Portsmouth train, after she asked about my views (presumably as a self-identifying ‘punk rocker’) and tried to persuade me that I was, in fact, a Christian, even if I didn’t know it.

I guess from the outside the next few years of my life may have seemed pretty anarchic, if not anarchistic. I lived in a couple of squats, until I was evicted by the owner’s (fresh out of prison) ‘security’ team – one of those old fashioned evictions that didn’t bother with bailiffs or the police, just a small gang of

men with baseball bats in the middle of the night – and I ended up living on an old fishing boat out in the middle of the harbour. The boat was owned by a local family of travellers who lived on a disused ammunition barge moored behind a chemical plant. Interestingly, this led to a few encounters with the Harbour Police: being boarded by the boys in blue was a whole new experience for me – sun, sea and piracy and all that. Eventually, after a long, cold and uncomfortable few months, that situation became impossible and I ended up living in a housing co-operative, in a condemned property scheduled for demolition to make way for a new supermarket. The supposed political ideals of an early 80s band of ex-squatters who had managed to set up a co-operative that was officially sanctioned by the City Council proved quite an eye-opener in the long run, and my cynicism toward middle class liberals masquerading as ‘socialists’ deepened. My frustration grew in direct correlation to the aspirations of certain co-op members to ingratiate themselves with senior figures in the local Labour party while at the same time maintaining something of an unspoken exclusion zone for genuinely desperate homeless locals to gain entry to their empty houses – apparently they weren’t the ‘right sort’ of people to be part of a housing co-operative, and a variety of rather well-to-do student friends of the ‘committee’ were a far better proposition.

Of course, life moves on and things change over time. Following an acrimonious split from the housing co-op and a shambolic period living in very short-stay temporary accommodation, on floors and sofas, I ended up working in a record shop, having a family and being rehoused by the City Council on the Leigh Park estate outside the city. It’s a long story with many ups and downs, and it doesn’t need expanding on here – the key thing at this point I think is to look back at my 1980s experience and to consider what (if anything) it meant, and how, or whether, my engagement with anarcho punk (or anarchism) affected me subsequently. Certainly my views remained – and remain – broadly libertarian, and my mistrust of both Left and Right is still deep-seated, though I would probably identify more closely with the old Left nowadays (when it had principles and championed the rights of workers, rather than the Labour party’s post-1990s model of neoliberal capitalism).

So where does that leave my ‘anarcho punk’ experience? Was it a brief flirtation with a ‘political’ movement, a natural diversion for an ongoing punk participant, or just a part of growing up and discovering new and ‘radical’ ideas, much as generations did before and after? Perhaps it’s all of those things in some way or another – and I’m guessing it’s not too dissimilar from many other stories from many other people who lived through the same period. It’s been interesting in recent years to observe punk growing old(er) and reflecting upon itself, through books, magazines, exhibitions, television programmes, countless anniversaries and landmark events.



The 80s punk generation seem to be having their turn now, in the same way that the 70s punks held the limelight a decade ago – that re-evaluation of punk’s evolution is welcome and long overdue, though I have to say (as a first wave/second wave punk fence-sitter) that the subsequent and increasingly dogmatic punk ‘rule book’ approach to authenticity sits uneasily with my passion for the original subculture in all its messy variety (and its lack of bloody rules – for me, one of the main attractions in the first place).

I think we are all a product of our history, our locality and our culture, and certainly punk – and anarcho punk – provided me with an awful lot of character-building experiences: though perhaps it is a broader sense of direct action, independence, critical awareness and self-reliance that has held sway far more than an allegiance to any particular political or ideological doctrine. Equally, I am still no fan of social etiquette, particularly when it strays into the realm of what constitute ‘acceptable’ beliefs and opinions, and I continue to take something of an oppositional view when I’m told that there are things that I am not allowed to do (or say, or think). That, to me, embraces all aspects of whatever ‘punk’ was, or is, in my terms. To paraphrase Johnny, “Am I an antichrist? Am I an anarchist?” – well, I’m still not sure, though I am certain that as I get older, I don’t really get too hung up about it any longer.