

Gavin Butt, No Machos or Pop Stars: When the Leeds Art Experiment went Punk.
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Gavin Butt's book *No Machos or Pop Stars* provides an engaging account of how the radical art school environment in Leeds in the late 1970s fostered a critical approach among its students, many of whom then applied this to their music. Butt takes the observations of Canadian rock critic Mary Harron as his starting point. Writing in the press at the time, she highlighted how the art school experience in Leeds meant that the two previously separate spheres of avant-garde art and popular culture became entwined. *No Machos or Pop Stars* relies on interviews and archival research, while drawing on the premise of Simon Reynold's *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984* (2005). Butt writes this as Professor of Art at Northumbria University, and the book is infused with a nostalgia for an era of radicalism and egalitarianism that has been largely undone by changes to university funding structures and recruitment priorities. He draws on input from colleagues he worked with on the excellent Post-Punk Then and Now lectures at Goldsmiths College (2014-16), where he was previously in post. Rewinding some decades, Butt was a young Marxist student studying an MA in the social history of art at Leeds University (1989) and taught by feminist scholar Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton (who prove central this story). As such, Butt has a personal connection and insight into the subject, and his enthusiasm is palpable throughout.

The critical approach fostered in Leeds was symptomatic of the ongoing shift towards the study of theory in art schools in the wake of the Coldstream Report in the 1960s. Perhaps inadvertently, this report paved the way for universities and art schools to embrace radical thinking that mirrored the preponderance of left wing thought in society more widely. A major focus is the Marxist- and Situationist-influenced pedagogy practiced in the art department at Leeds University. In the late 1970s its curriculum was shaped by a political critique of art, fostered through the ideas of recently appointed art historians influenced by social history. As well as Pollock and Orton, this included former member of the Situationist International (and its English branch, King Mob) T.J. Clark. The idea was to move art away from its romantic and bourgeois associations with self-expression towards a more critical approach. This move was further cultivated by the later appointments of John Tagg and Terry Atkinson, who had co-founded the influential conceptual artists' collaboration, Art & Language (1967), while at Coventry School of Art. Butt looks at how bands including Gang of Four and The Mekons incorporated elements of a Marxist-infused criticality into their music. This sensibility also infused the art department at Leeds Polytechnic (the "Poly"), with

Scritti Politti, for instance (whose singer-songwriter Green Gartside, and drummer, Tom Morley studied there) being named after Gramsci's terminology for political scrawl.

Butt documents how the students shifted the political critique they learned at art school away from avant-garde art towards popular culture, and the vehicle they chose to do this with was punk. Several future members of Leeds post-punk bands, including Gang of Four, The Mekons, Scritti Politti (Green Gartside), Fad Gadget (Frank Tovey), and Soft Cell (Mark Almond) had attended the Sex Pistols' live performance at the Poly on their now near-mythical Anarchy tour in 1976. Butt's account of the gig, however, shows that the audiences were overall quite unimpressed. This was particularly the case for the women present, several of whom would nonetheless go on to be mainstays of post-punk bands.

The explosion of bands and revitalised horizons for youth in the UK brought about by punk in the late 1970s opened new cultural terrain for art school students. However, the argument that punk provides a means for articulating a political critique grounded in theory, with its elite academic connotations, contrasts with its egalitarianism. According to Butt, Leeds art school students saw punk as a means of waging "anti-capitalist struggle." Others argued that the notion of theorizing music was in itself elitist.

Another focus is on the Fluxus-inspired leanings of the Polytechnic art department, which hosted influential teachers including Geoff Teasdale and the anarchist Jeff Nuttall, known for his book on the counterculture *Bomb Culture* (1967). Butt documents Nuttall's distinct, provocative approach and methods, which veered towards macho posturing and behaviour. Experimental, anarchic performance art and sound experimentation thrived at the Poly (which was far better equipped for art practice than the University). Butt takes in experimental theatre production, including performances by Mark Almond and Soft Cell co-founder David Ball. He delves into the performance art of Frank Tovey, showing how his later routines with Fad Gadget (1980-84) drew on the shock tactics he had explored there. He also highlights the trajectory of lesser-known groups who also impacted on the cultural landscape, including Household Name and Another Colour.

Despite the liberating ethos and societal shifts associated with of this era, traditional social structures often remained in place. Butt's account is granular in his documenting of this, exploring for example how the large intake from the nearby prestigious Sevenoaks Grammar School influenced the University environment. The Poly provided more access for working-

class students and those with British immigrant parents, although Black and brown students still formed a tiny minority before the 1980s.

Punk infected youth culture across the board, and Butt is careful to highlight working class punk and goth/post-punk bands without an art school connection. The student bands were accused of receiving disproportionate attention from the music press as *the* voice of Leeds, and Butt acknowledges these rifts and disparities, while arguing that punk bohemianism to some extent transcended reductionist binaries. This transcendence is something that was enabled through the overhang of welfarism that still existed into the 1980s, which facilitated both people receiving dole money, and poorer students with maintenance grants, to form bands.

Butt provides a document of bands who created their own version of (post) punk, away from the London-based svengalis who dominate the narrative. This is a story where the politics of gender, race, and sexuality are foregrounded. The book provides a fascinating insight into how the budding bands built on the collaborative approach championed in the art schools, forming overlapping groups of friends and enabling cross-cultural and social experimentation.

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