

Punk as *Praxis*

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What is Punk? One answer is that it is a genre of popular music, a sub-genre of Rock, pioneered by bands like Ramones, the Sex Pistols and the Clash in the mid-1970s. Punk, understood this way, is a set of songs, a *playlist*. We can debate which songs exactly should be included on this list—“Anarchy in the UK” definitely, “White Riot” definitely, “Psycho Killer” maybe, and so on—as we can debate which songs best epitomize Punk.¹ However such debates go, the underlying assumption is that Punk is a body of music there to be heard.

A second way of thinking about Punk comes to mind if we ask of Punk songs, what makes them Punk? Punk songs have some distinctive musical features—a quick, simple tempo and basic chord progressions, for instance—but the distinctive sound of a Punk song seems to derive from something else: the *attitude* it expresses. It’s not the thrashing of a handful of distorted guitar chords or a pounding bass as such that we intuitively recognize as Punk, but the angst, anger and rebelliousness expressed in that sound. The distinctive sound of Punk, we could say, is the sound of the Punk attitude. And this attitude gets expressed not just in the songs that make up the Punk playlist, but also in Punk fashion and the lifestyle we associate with Punks.

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At the top of my personal Punk playlist are songs by the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Stranglers, Buzzcocks, Magazine, the Saints, Stiff Little Fingers, The Ruts, The Fall, Crass and Dead Kennedys. I’ll be using some of these songs to illustrate the philosophical points I make about Punk in this chapter.

The playlist view and the attitude view of Punk are both legitimate ways of looking at Punk. But they both miss, or do not properly bring into focus, something which is crucial to the Punk phenomenon: the fact that Punk involved *action* of sorts. It's obvious that Punk, like other forms of popular music, only came into being through various kinds of activity: the formation of bands, the composition of songs, the playing at gigs, the recording of tracks, the promotion of records and so on. But in the case of Punk, such activities were carried out in a particular way, and it was by acting in that way that Punks distinguished themselves from others. The particular form of action in which Punks were engaged and which brings us to the heart of the Punk phenomenon—so I will argue—is *praxis*.

The Concept of *Praxis*

Origins

Praxis is a Greek word, and it is the sense given to this word by the ancient philosopher Aristotle (384 – 322 BC), especially in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, that subsequent use of the term *praxis* (in English and other modern languages) invokes.² Aristotle's basic insight was that while human beings, like other animals, have desires for the goods necessary for life (food, warmth, and so on), in the human case satisfaction of such desires is not enough for them to *flourish*. A flourishing human life, Aristotle thought, also involves engagement in self-directed activity. Human activities admit of various degrees of self-directedness. Activity that is exclusively at the command of someone else or in the service of someone else's needs (such as a slave performs), barely qualifies as self-directed at all. Activity that makes something useful in accordance with a design, such as an artisan performs, admits of more

² See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. T. Irwin (Hackett, 2019), especially Book VI. The book is a transcript of lectures notes.

self-directedness, but it is limited by the demands of the job and the properties of the thing to be made. Activity that is done neither in the service of a master nor for the sake of some product, but for its *own* sake, is more self-directed still. It is activity of this sort, activity that is its own end (“autotelic” activity), that Aristotle calls *praxis*.

For Aristotle, engagement in *praxis*-like, “autotelic” or fully self-directed activity is a constitutive feature of human flourishing. But if *praxis* is not available to slaves, or artisans, or businessmen (who act in order to make money), who is able to engage in it? Only free-persons (non-slaves) not preoccupied with work that provides the means of life. For Aristotle, *praxis* was the prerogative of a leisured elite. But if the members of this elite are to *flourish* through their *praxis*, they must act so as to ensure the flourishing of the community of which they are a part. This makes *praxis* an essentially political concept for Aristotle: it is by way of the collective *praxis* of a community (Aristotle had in mind the Greek city-state the *polis*) that the community realizes its common good. While *praxis* wasn’t available to everyone, it reached perfection in the self-directing activities of a whole community.

Existentialist Praxis

We owe the modern understanding of *praxis* as much to some highly influential twentieth-century interpreters of Aristotle as to Aristotle’s texts themselves. Chief amongst these interpreters was Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976). Heidegger’s lecture course on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* at the University of Marburg in 1924 is the stuff of legend: students included Hannah Arendt (1906 – 1975), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900 – 2002), Hans Jonas (1903 – 1993), and Leo Strauss (1899 – 1973)—some of the key thinkers of their age—and

they were captivated by Heidegger's teaching.³ Heidegger brought Aristotle's concept of *praxis* to life by reading it *existentially*. Rather than taking *praxis* to be about human flourishing, Heidegger took it to be essentially about *authentic existence*. *Praxis* was first and foremost a mode of being, Heidegger thought; the mode in which the meaning of Being truly or authentically discloses itself. Being-in-the-mode-of-*praxis* stands in contrast to inauthentic existence, to a mere going along with things, to stale and suffocating convention. As opposed to mere getting by, or just doing what "one" does or saying what "one" says in this or that situation, *praxis* involves a radical questioning of accepted norms, a speaking in one's own voice, and a striking out at something new.

Of Heidegger's students, it was Arendt who would do most to interpret the contemporary world through the lens of the concept of *praxis*.⁴ Arendt emphasized the communicative aspect of *praxis* and the self-disclosure that comes from unforced speech. Arendt also stressed the public context of *praxis*-action and the importance of vibrant public spheres for democratic politics. But she lamented the absence of such spheres in contemporary societies, and more generally the dearth of opportunity for *praxis* in modernity. Autotelic activity, action done for its own sake rather than as a means to some external end, is barely possible anymore; such is the modern obsession with strategic thinking, efficiency, productivity, growth and so on. The ideal of the active life, which Aristotle had envisaged as a life of *praxis*, had degenerated in modern times into a mindless frenzy of working and spending, Arendt thought.

³ See M. Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. R. D. Metcalf and M. B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

⁴ See H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958).

Marxist Praxis

Critique of modern society by way of the concept of *praxis* was mounted not just by Heidegger and his followers, but also by Western Marxists such as György Lukács (1885 – 1971), Antonio Gramsci (1891 – 1937), Herbert Marcuse (1898 – 1979) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905 – 1980).⁵ For these thinkers, *praxis* was the key to *overthrowing* capitalism, not just diagnosing its ills. The transformation of capitalism into communism could not be left to the laws of history playing themselves out, as so-called ‘Orthodox’ Marxism maintained. Rather, it required self-conscious acts of resistance and self-organization on the part of ordinary working people. It is primarily in such ground-level acts of opposition and self-organization that *praxis*, and with it the potential for real social change, is to be found. In Western Marxism, the concept of *praxis* becomes intimately bound up not just with political action, as it had been in Aristotle and Arendt, but with revolutionary action.

The Practice of Punk

Let’s now look at how a concept first introduced in a course of instruction to the political elite of ancient Greece, then adopted by radical philosophers in central Europe between the two World Wars, brings us to the heart of Punk. It will help to distinguish the negative or critical aspect of Punk *praxis* from its positive or affirmative aspect.

⁵ See G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971/1923); A. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Q. Hoare and G. Nowell Smith (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971); and J-P. Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, vol. 1, trans. A. Sheridan-Smith, (London: New Left Books, 1976/1960).

Negations

In the first instance, Punk involves a “no-saying.” It begins with a “no” to how things are currently done, a refusal to carry on as usual.

The no-saying is most literal in the lyrics of some classic Punk songs. “Anarchy in the UK” begins with what many listeners at the time would have found the most shocking negation of all: “I am the *anti*-Christ.” Typically, the object of negation is more diffuse, and easier for Catholic kids to sing along to: “*Something* better change,” as in the Stranglers’ hit. But the targeted negation is more effective, and one of the most persistent targets of Punk negation (at least in its first wave) was the world of *employment*.

In part, this was a matter of calling out the scarcity of decent employment (“No jobs buddy”), especially for young people, and the drudgery and boredom of the work that was available. But underlying this was a questioning of the *promise* of work and the ideal of a career. The refusal to have one’s life defined by employment comes across especially powerfully in some of the Clash’s early songs (“Career Opportunities” and “Clash City Rockers”, for instance). On the one hand, there is a refusal to fit into established, stultifying occupational roles. On the other, there is a refusal to be given over to the rewards of employment: buying and consuming things. The predominant message of “The Clash” album is: “No to life without *praxis*!”

But the musical communication of this message can *itself* only be a *praxis* if it is not co-opted for external ends, especially commercial ones. Commercialization is fatal to *praxis* and resistance to it in the act of making popular music is one of the most characteristic features of Punk. Punk-rockers are in constant, open battle with the forces that would make money out of them or use them for some other form of gain. Some of the best Punk songs take up this theme: “EMI,” “Public Image,” and “Garageland,” to mention my personal favorites. The “no” to Punk without *praxis* on account of it being co-opted for commercial

purposes wasn't just a matter of words. It was backed up by active resistance to the big record companies.

Another way of protecting Punk from commercialization was to refuse to *entertain*. Entertainment is a form of music-making and playing that serves an external purpose (to please people) and in that sense is a form of instrumental action, not autotelic action. The goal of the entertainer is to give pleasure to an audience, typically by engaging their fantasies and distracting them from reality, rather than confronting them with reality. In return for the entertainment provided, the entertainer takes the audience's money. Most Punks, though, did not see themselves as entertainers. They did not refuse payment for their performances (when they were paid for them), but neither the payment nor any pleasure the audience may have enjoyed was the *point* of the performance.

Refusal to go along with the stock-in-trade fantasies of popular music was another mark of Punk *praxis*. The sentimental, cliché-ridden love song (think Donny Osmond, Rod Stewart) was a strict no-no. Some saw the whole love song genre as a fraud and repudiated it completely. In any case, there were more important things than holding hands to worry about—nuclear war, for instance. The arms race looms menacingly in the background—and occasionally the foreground—of Punk, and a “no” to the military-industrial complex was for some (most notably Crass) the first and final responsibility of Punk.

Negation is a vital element of Punk *praxis*. It is a mistake, though, to think of Punk as *just* about negation. Most Punks saw this, but some were fooled into thinking that refusal and destruction are the final ends of Punk action and to be glorified as such. The glamorization of violence that Punk sometimes degenerated into—think, for instance, of Sid Vicious's trick or treat antics in the abject “The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle,” or more generally the on- and off-stage violence at Punk gigs—was an embarrassment to most Punks, and the antithesis of what got them into Punk in the first place.

Affirmations

The appeal of Punk was more due to its affirmative aspect—to what can positively be done through Punk *praxis*—than its sheer negations or refusals. It was the *alternative* it presented to established ways of doing things that attracted people.

The first positive thing about Punk *praxis* is that through it you can say what *you mean*, what comes to *your mind*—as the first line of Buzzcocks' Punk classic “Boredom” goes. You don't just say what “one” says or what “one” means when writing and playing a song. The space Punk provided for speaking in your *own* voice was incredibly liberating for the youth at the time. Saying what you mean and speaking your own mind are key features of *praxis* action as distinct from strategic or instrumental action, where speaking is merely a means to some external end, a way of manipulating people to think and act as someone else wants them to.

The Punk song also provides a vehicle for you to say what's *on* your mind. You sing about the things that matter to you, the world as you see it. So, while its important for you to speak in your own voice, you don't just talk about yourself. There are things around you to call out: complacency, decadence, oppression, exploitation, hopelessness, defiance, and so on. But there is also an inner world of feelings to express, and the challenge is to be true to those feelings, to express them authentically. If you do that successfully, the feeling itself can be intensified. Clarity of expression and intensification of feeling are both enhancements of life, and both could be achieved by Punk *praxis*.

In order to speak in your own voice, you first have to find it. But you can only find it by experimenting, and in the course of experimenting, you create your voice, you *self-create*. Experimentation in song-writing and musical form was another important aspect of Punk. Punk *praxis* was fundamentally *creative* action. It's a reflection of this emphasis on creativity

that Punk bands were expected to play their own songs; a practice generally carried over into the recordings.⁶ But Punk experimentation was rarely a matter of musical *technique*. You didn't need any particular musical skills or expertise to try it out. You certainly didn't need any qualifications. In principle, anyone could do it.

It wasn't just in song-writing and playing that Punks acted experimentally and creatively. The whole productive process was up for grabs. Don't have a band? Form one. Don't have songs? Write them. Don't have a record label? Set one up. Don't wait for permission to do any of these things; don't wait till you have the qualifications. *Acting* for yourself—self-directed, *praxis* action—was the Punk way.

We shouldn't be misled though into thinking that Punk *praxis* was just about individuals doing their own thing indifferently to each other. The subject (or agent) of Punk *praxis* was an "us" as well as an "I." This is obvious—no individual can play the drums, guitar, and bass at the same time or produce a record all on their own—but it has a significance that is easily overlooked. Punk *praxis* is essentially a form of *social* action: it involves doing something *together* for a shared purpose. In our atomized world, opportunities for social action can be hard to find. Not least amongst the positive effects of Punk was to give people such opportunities.

⁶ In *Punk: Attitude* (the documentary film directed by Don Letts, 2005) Hilly Kristall said he had a policy of only having bands on at *CBGB's* who played their own music. From recollection, a similar policy held at British Punk venues such as *Eric's* in Liverpool. There are very few covers on the classic Punk albums, The Clash's cover of Junior Murvin's "Police & Thieves" prominent among them. Having said that, the song lists for the Sex Pistols' early gigs consisted almost entirely of covers, and this was true for other Punk bands.

You could also find community in Punk. There were the squats, of course, but more relevant for *praxis* were the performance and discussion spaces organized around Punk. In the Fanzines, the music press, and to a certain extent radio stations, Punk found a vibrant public sphere, a place of passionate discussion and critique. The Fanzines would often be sold and read in record shops. Reading the mags and flicking through the records, you got the sense that a higher life and true community were possible. In this respect, a visit to the record shop was like attending a modern art gallery, only less intimidating, less pretentious, more inclusive, and more fun.

Post-Punk *Poiesis*

On 4 June 1976, a gathering took place at the Lesser Free Trade Hall in Manchester, England, that was as consequential for the history of Punk as Heidegger's lectures in Marburg were for the history of the concept of *praxis* half a century earlier. It was the legendary performance by the Sex Pistols to a small audience that included Howard Trafford, Peter McNeish, Peter Hook, Bernard Sumner, and Steven Morrissey. A few weeks later the Sex Pistols did another gig at the same venue to a larger audience that included Tony Wilson, Ian Curtis and Mark E. Smith.⁷

The gigs marked the arrival of the Sex Pistols as a band breaking with the past and opening hitherto unimagined possibilities for popular music-making. These possibilities would be experimented with and developed by the bands those audience members would go onto form: Buzzcocks, Magazine, The Fall, Joy Division, New Order and the Smiths. The

⁷ There was no attendance list so we have no proof of who was actually there. I'm relying here on Paul Glynn's account. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-58557782>. Accessed 07/10/2021.

independent record label Tony Wilson would soon set up, *Factory*, encouraged further experimentation along the lines the Sex Pistols first put on show that night. Increasingly, though, the music produced under the label lost its resemblance to the original Punk sound. That it did so reflects an inherent weakness in Punk *praxis*.

We saw that *praxis* as conceived by Aristotle was distinct from, and in a sense opposed to, activity that involved skill, craft or technique—what Aristotle called *poiesis*. Punk’s refusal of musical virtuosity for its own sake was thus a rejection of a *poiesis* model of music, and this had an empowering effect: punk enabled and encouraged you to say what you meant, to express yourself authentically, and anyone could join in. Punk put *praxis* before *poiesis*. But saying what you mean, and being true to your experience of your inner and outer world, is itself something that can be refined through musical technique. It turns out that you can say more interesting things, and be truer to your experience, if you are more musically equipped. As the first wave of Punks learned this, most left the essentially amateur *praxis* sound of Punk behind to develop the more sophisticated, professional-sounding music of Post-Punk.

This might be one reason why your Post-Punk or “Alternative” playlist is likely to be longer, more diverse and more interesting to listen to than your Punk list. But as we have seen, there is more to Punk than a playlist.