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Chapter 5

The Ideology and Practice of Authenticity in Punk Subculture

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By the middle of the eighteenth century the sensibilities of Enlightenment ideals had begun to incense some young intellectuals, writers, musicians and artists. Identifying themselves as Romantics, this young cabal prioritized the virtues of intuition, imagination and feeling over reason and method, replacing the notion *I think, therefore I am* with a philosophy more akin to *I feel, therefore I am* (Boyle 2004). In his short treatise on the ideal of authentic selfhood, Charles Taylor (1992) contends that the residue of these aesthetic standards has diffused into the contemporary social milieu, manifesting as a cultural preoccupation with self-realization predicated on the belief that human beings are imbued with moral codes that must be explored and clarified in order to actualize their intrinsic potentialities. Proposing that we live in a "culture of authenticity" (29), he argues that humans have come to construe themselves as beings with inner depths and that being in touch with oneself has taken on independent moral significance, supplanting prior efforts to attain connectedness with God. This chapter explores the links between this Romantic ideal of authenticity and the ideologies and cultural practices espoused by members of the punk subculture.

A great deal of Romantic sentiment originated with the thought of Rousseau, who contended that individuals should follow their inner voices and resist the pressures and callings of society in order to recover intimate moral contact with themselves. Rousseau also popularized the idea of "self-determining freedom," suggesting that people become free only when they make their own choices rather than allowing external influences to shape their lives. Extending this line of argument, Herder proposed that all people possess original ways of being human, and that failing to locate or actualize those unique modes of existence banishes them to conditions of inhumanness and incompleteness (cited in Taylor 1992). Implicit in this line of reasoning is a preference for *being* over *doing*. Romantics believed that treating the self as an instrument by subverting one's creative powers and freedom to external social forces confounded discovery and actualization of the inner voice, defeating one's life-purpose and undermining the attainment of moral purity.

Contemporary writers have denigrated this orientation to life as a malaise of modernity and have dismissed the quest for authenticity as indicative of a “culture of narcissism” typical of the “me-generation” (e.g. Bell 1976; Lasch 1979). These critics argue that striving for authenticity overemphasizes the value of the self relative to community and consequently narrows peoples’ lives by making them poorer in meaning. Such critiques, we believe, neglect to consider two properties of authenticity as a cultural ideal, however. First, a moral compass generally guides the search for self-realization; it is not motivated by vanity or self-worship (Taylor 1992). And second, individuals celebrate authenticity in order to balance the extreme dislocation that characterizes life in the postmodern world, in which traditional concepts of self, community and space have collapsed. This collapse has led to a widespread internalization of doubt and an obsession with distinguishing the real from the fake (Allan 1998).

According to Turner (1976), changes in the nature of social integration within advanced industrial societies have caused individuals to uproot their self-conceptions from institutional frameworks and reanchor them in deeply felt impulses and emotions. Late capitalism has destabilized the institutions that once provided people with opportunities to *attain* meaningful self-concepts through fulfillment of social duties and roles. These changes increasingly motivate people to abandon socially obligatory identities and instead turn inward in order to *find* and feel their “real selves” and reality more generally. Consequently, whether in relation to food (Lu and Fine 1995), art (Fine 2003) or selfhood (Gergen 1991), a quest for authenticity has risen to the fore in advanced industrial societies, seducing individuals with the promise of the “really real” (Geertz 1973) and serving as a life-boat to keep them afloat in the uncertain seas of postmodernity.

Scholars have found that similar issues of ontological insecurity influence participants in youth subcultures, which emerge in response to common problems of satisfaction or adjustment (e.g., Becker 1963; Merton 1938). Albert Cohen (1955), for example, found that working class boys frustrated with their inability to compete in the status system of middle-class institutions rejected prevailing cultural means and goals, supplanting both with ones that they could more readily achieve. Similarly, Sarah Thornton’s (1996) research on rave culture revealed that participants accrued status by garnering subcultural capital, which also reflexively marked them as “authentic” in contrast to the mainstream. However, while theoretically rich, such research has made little attempt to locate the quest for authenticity within the larger social context of late modernity. This chapter tackles that task, contending that the ideology of authenticity serves as something more than a vehicle to social status for young people. In what follows, we explore how the quest for authenticity among members of the punk subculture is deeply implicated in two processes: a morally oriented quest oriented toward self-discovery inspired by Romantic aesthetics and an effort to stabilize reality in the postmodern condition.

Youth Subcultures and the Study of Authenticity

Early subcultural research rarely questioned the socially constructed boundaries of subcultural collectivities. Rather, it assumed the objectivity of identity by uncritically assigning membership categories to individual participants based on their stylistic preferences or behaviors. This assumption is perhaps nowhere more evident than in Dick Hebdige’s (1979) book, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. Focusing on the emergence and eventual diffusion of punk, he studied the mass cultural incorporation of subcultural style and argued that when “the original innovations which signify ‘subculture’ are translated into commodities and made generally available, they become ‘frozen’” (1979:96). For Hebdige, punk was authentic only at its moment of innovative conception, after which a hegemonic culture industry transformed it into a commodity to sell back to future generations of consumers. He argued that this process of commodification destroyed punk’s creativity and diluted the “forbidden” content that originally comprised its authenticity (i.e., punks’ collective awareness of their marginalized social position). This realist perspective¹ privileges and reifies an etic discourse of subcultural authenticity, marginalizing those who are identified as outside of or peripheral to an “authentic” subcultural core (Williams 2006). Realist perspectives also obscure the processes of negotiation and construction through which subculturalists objectify authenticity by assuming that it constitutes something that participants have or do not have.

In more recent decades, scholars have advanced the study of subcultures through the application of a microsociological perspective. Resultant work has deemphasized the CCCS’ concentration on class and resistance and given subcultural participants voice with respect to the meaning of authenticity. In particular, Thornton’s (1996) research on rave culture is significant in its move beyond realism, conceptualizing authenticity as a social construction that possesses no inherent properties. Utilizing Bourdieu’s (1984) concepts of distinction and cultural capital as well as Becker’s (1963) concept of hipness, she explored how participants worked to construct a collective identity in contrast to an ostensibly homogenous mainstream while vying with one another for subcultural status. She found that her informants had constructed a status system predicated on the possession of subcultural capital, which was objectified through social relationships and ownership (e.g., having the right clothing) and embodied through knowledge (e.g., knowing the right people). Departing from Hebdige, Thornton re-theorized authenticity as something that one earns and subsequently works to maintain—something that is ephemeral, negotiated and processual. Following her lead, Muggleton (2002) claimed that an interest in expressing individuality rather than group affiliation trumps concern with achieving insider-status among those who subscribe to subcultural styles (see also Widdicombe 1993; 1998). His perspective—following in some respects from the work of Steve Redhead (1990:25), who notes that “‘authentic’ subcultures were produced by subculturalists, not the other way around”—has gained significant

1 For other examples, see, e.g., Fox (1987) and Willis (1993).

clout among scholars who sympathize with a postmodern view of youth cultures. In Muggleton's view, the "post-subculturalist" constructs authenticity in a way that eschews membership in pre-defined groups and rejects the influence of others, taking an *individualistic* approach to subcultural style. Herein lies the problem.

Research on subcultural authenticity has focused primarily on style and stylistic preference. Overemphasizing style fetishizes material culture and its consumption as indispensable dimensions of youth subculture. This brings us back to Hebdige's work on punk. Apart from exemplifying a realist conception of subcultural authenticity, such work also stands as the quintessential representation of an enduring interest in punk as a culture of display. Hebdige's semiological analysis reduced the significance of punk to its material qualities, describing its style as "noise" as opposed to "sound," maintaining that "subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. It operates exclusively in the leisure sphere ... It communicates through commodities [...]. It directs attention to itself; it gives itself to be read" (Hebdige 1979:90, 94-95, 101). Alas, subcultural style, so salient and intriguing to the sociological eye, has become the most commonly analyzed dimension of subculture studies. Scholars have framed, interpreted, and defined subcultures through the lens of style, despite claiming to have overcome their homological heritage (e.g., Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003).

Like post-subculture scholars, we believe that a profit-driven culture industry routinely co-opts and distorts many elements of subculture, including style. Unlike them, however, we want to de-emphasize punk's material culture and focus instead on its value and belief systems, through which many young people continue to ground their authenticity claims. We explore how punks construct a concept of authenticity that relies on ideological commitment, emphasizing how they frame subcultural participation as part of a larger life project that is independent of external influence. We go on to reveal that this construction is remarkably congruent with the ideal of authenticity that prevails in the broader social milieu (Taylor 1992; Turner 1976). Thus, unlike many youth-subculture scholars, we argue that punk much more reflects than resists so-called mainstream culture.

Subcultural Authenticity, Selfhood and Ideological Commitment

Our study draws from an ethnography of the punk subculture in a large metropolitan area in the Southeastern US.² Informants consisted of self-identified punks that the first author personally knew or became acquainted with during the study. Their demographic and lifestyle characteristics were diverse. Participants ranged from eighteen to twenty-seven years of age and had a manifold of religious, political, and class backgrounds, although most could be characterized as lower-middle class, agnostic or atheist (yet, notably, there were a number of religious informants) and politically left-leaning. Educational attainment spanned from GEDs to

graduate degrees (the mode being a bachelor's degree), and the occupations of subjects ranged from service workers to white collar professionals. The lives of some participants revolved around active participation in punk scenes, whereas others maintained a more distant, personal commitment to the subculture's value system. There were no constants with respect to style display—some informants made extensive use of sartorial accoutrements while others could not readily be distinguished from those outside the subculture.

The first author undertook participant observation during five months in 2004 and five months in the winter of 2007-8. He also conducted twenty in-depth interviews with fourteen men and six women, which ranged from 45 to 120 minutes in length and focused on the experiences of participants before identifying as punk; how they became involved with the subculture; what values and beliefs they associated with punk; how they viewed punk style; how they distinguished insiders from outsiders; how acts of resistance were implicated in their subcultural participation; and what overall social and political views they held.

Three tenets of punk ideology emerged during data analysis—tenets that we have termed "rejection," "reflexivity" and "self-actualization." These tenets reflect a broader societal commitment to self-discovery that Taylor (1992), Boyle (2004) and Turner (1976) discuss at length. Taylor argues that contemporary society's morally oriented quest toward self-discovery manifests in a devotion to creation and construction, originality and opposition to the rules of society. Boyle paints a very similar picture of authenticity, adding that to be authentic means to be human—to be rooted in "felt" reality as opposed to the passionlessness of mass-production. Turner makes a parallel argument but from a social-psychological perspective, suggesting that people have come to recognize impulsive feelings and actions as emanating from the "real self" rather than stemming from conforming to society's institutional mandates. Punk subculture structures the development of authenticity in a very similar way to how these scholars describe it.

Rejection

We labeled the first value about which informants showed concern "rejection." While other empirical research has found that punks place a premium on resistance and largely reject the common sense world of "dominant culture," the nature of their resistance has remained poorly conceptualized (cf. Copes and Williams 2007; Williams 2009). Fox (1987), for example, cast punk resistance as a component of style, claiming that most participants within it lack "consciousness" and suggesting that their resistance was rooted in a vague "anti-establishment, anarchist sentiment" (352). Our interviewees, to the contrary, offered very thick analytical descriptions of their resistance to mainstream culture. Expressing unease toward socialization and dedication to a perceived inner nature, they claimed to reject consumption in the broadest sense of the word, with respect not just to commodities but also to knowledge and identity, eschewing essentially all learning directed toward

² For a detailed overview of the punk subculture, see O'Hara (1999).

enculturation. For example, when asked what punk meant to him, Blake, a 21 year old-college student said:

Punk ... involves heeding a questioning, skeptical, attitude, resisting social pressures and norms, rejecting undue and sometimes even just authority ... Essentially [it] involves living the life that I want to live without regard for how others perceive and judge me.

For Blake, punk entailed a rejection of societal pressure in favor of a frame of reference oriented around the goal of living the life that he wants to live. He implied that tension exists between the pressures of societal integration and the pull of one's inner callings.

Elaborating a similar position, Cooper asserted that punk culture exists in contrast to an "ideology of acceptance." For him, this ideology referred to a lifelong "system" of societal indoctrination that constrains the potentialities of the self and perpetuates existing systems of power. The system that Cooper indicted was construed as the collective efforts of agents of socialization including schools, media, family, religion, government, and peers.³ Informants contended that such institutions maintain the positions of those in power at the expense of others, compelling people to forsake their inner essences in order to achieve fractional and illusory gains via social approval. Agents of socialization do this by inhibiting people from exploring their inner ideas and maximizing their life experiences, working instead to promote a strict system of conformity that renders deviance harshly punishable. The punks that we interviewed believe that this system, having as its goal the establishment of a "dull and drab" (Tom, interview) culture that suits privileged others, undermines one's aesthetic potential for self-expression. Hardly narcissistic, they assigned moral significance to both the notions of self-expression and societal constraint, because the phenomenological experience of self-as-impulse had transformed the institutional order into a set of norms (as opposed to values), which they felt arbitrarily constrained their ability to engage in genuine self-expression in order to recognize and enact the real self (Turner 1976). For example:

Punk rock is an idea. Oversimplifying it as a style of clothing, a set of chords, or even as an attitude erodes the idea. The idea behind punk rock is that social change

3 While as sociologists we recognize the inevitability of socialization, we want to emphasize that informants repeatedly expressed the belief that they had personally derived their value and belief systems through a sustained process of introspection. Although self-identifying as punk, many claimed to reject even the subculture as a source of socialization, expressing resistance to any knowledge or information that originated in others rather than in themselves. An etic analysis of our data would not lend support for their claims, as it seems that informants resisted only mainstream sources of socialization while embracing the subculture as a valid locus of influence. In the spirit of our interpretive approach, however, we will continue to give an emic account of punk ideology that emphasizes a rejection of all socialization and a radical turn inward.

comes from within. Many people view punks as non-conformists and rebellious, but that too is an oversimplification. Punk rock seeks to break down an ideology of acceptance. [...] As human beings, we're socialized into thinking that the truth we seek lies somewhere hidden within ... pre-established paradigms. Things like "take comfort in that which is familiar, fear that which is unknown;" things you start learning as early as a child that never go away [...] Punk seeks to change individual mindsets as a precursor to the types of ideas that bring about change ... Punk itself will never change the world, but the impact of punk is that freedom of will gets sparked in the post-punk generation. And yes, absolutely that begins with the individual ... it is the unending process that is key. [Cooper, interview]

Dedicated to breaking down an "ideology of acceptance," other informants regularly emphasized the importance of resisting external socialization. They asserted that punk, as a movement, is oriented around the goal of ending socialization and of deconstructing social norms, beliefs, and values in order to more purely experience life. Thus, rather than representing class or generation-based resistance, punks' rhetoric of rejection reflects the modernist quest for authenticity, which "demands that [people] break the hold of external impositions and [make decisions] for [themselves] alone" (Taylor 1992:27). The irony of emphasizing resistance to socialization while staking claim to and participating in punk subculture supports Muggleton's (2002) contention that postmodern youth cultures can "be understood, somewhat paradoxically, as collective expressions and celebrations of individualism" (79). Like the subculturalists in his study, the punks in our study subjectively resolved this contradiction by exaggerating the extent to which mainstream culture was homogenous and punk subculture was heterogeneous. For example, according to Charlie: "the punk scene has so many different facets [...] there are so many different ideas in punk rock [...] but everybody is rejecting the same thing."

Many interviewees also described possessing an "I don't give a fuck" attitude. When probed with respect to what exactly they meant by this, informants spoke of their concern with self-realization and with undoing societal influence in order to lead meaningful lives. Our findings break with how other empirical work has framed punks' ambivalence. Past scholars (e.g. Baron 1989; Fox 1987; Gaines 1998) have construed the idea of "not giving a fuck" as a blasé attitude arising from the boredom and purposelessness of young people who have been socialized to be consumers and spectators, explaining the sentiment away as a product of the postmodern condition. When asked to clarify their own statements and behaviors, however, interviewees gave a rather different explanation. Tom, a 24 year old musician, had the following to say about this mentality:

When you say "I don't give a fuck," it's kind of like the existential crisis is getting put on the table of like ... how am I supposed to go about life: making a living, supporting a family, having a career, getting educated, whatever that means these days. It's like having all of that thrust in your face and looking at it and saying, "I don't know what to do with this, I can't do anything with this,

I'm not equipped emotionally." When I say that that guy doesn't give a fuck, I think that guy went out of his way and burned all of those bridges and said, "I don't give a fuck, I'm doing everything by my own rules." It means you've got to make your own way, you don't give a fuck what the rest of the world gives a fuck about ... it's like you have all these people telling you that you have to care about these things ... and I don't give a fuck about that. You know, I've got to do well for myself if I want to be an individual.

Informants' commentary did not exhibit a blasé attitude or a nihilistic orientation toward the world. Rather, interviewees claimed to reject received culture because they saw no value in it. As opposed to succumbing to feelings of purposelessness and meaninglessness, punks like Tom demonstrated a commitment to finding fulfillment in life on their own terms—an outlook that is patently postmodernist and that indicates a self-concept anchored in impulse rather than in institutions.

Interviewees also described a humanist imperative in punk that involved rejecting various forms of social inequity such as racism and sexism. They couched this imperative within a larger concern for anti-authoritarianism—expressing a desire to topple hierarchies and power structures that undermined their abilities to achieve self-realization—rather than within a normatively conceptualized commitment to social justice or equality. This is not to say that a belief in the dignity and worth of all human beings did not motivate informants' rejection of inequality and inequity to some extent, but our findings do suggest that punk ideology is more grounded in a rejection of the process of hegemonic socialization than in its consequences. Humanism thus served as a vehicle for achieving self-realization—for undoing societal influence and forging one's own meaning in life.

Rejection was not framed in black and white but rather on a continuum that involved situational relevance. The punks that we spoke with did not seem to take on an attitude that inherently and automatically rejected all forms of authority and establishment. While they regularly exhibited disdain for both authority and "the establishment," opposition to the idea of *mindlessly* internalizing the rules and beliefs that established institutions and authority figures promote better describes their position. Trevor and Henry, for example, acknowledged that some aspects of education were important. However, they expressed a strong disinclination toward the idea of allowing their schooling to sculpt them into particular types of people with particular beliefs. For another informant, Eve, punk involved making a commitment to freeing herself from external influence so that she could formulate her own viewpoints:

It took me a couple years and a couple bad mistakes to realize that being punk doesn't have to mean fuck this—you know, fuck fill in the blank. It doesn't have to mean just rejecting everything outright just because it may seem conformist to someone else ... It definitely means that instead of just sort of giving that knee jerk reaction of rejection toward things to really actively think about them and to create my own viewpoint.

Discussing her Christian faith and her friends' unwillingness to accept what they saw as a disjuncture between religion and "free" thought and expression, she went on to explain how she ... :

managed to sort of incorporate that into my life and keep my belief system without ... I don't know ... without it interfering with my ability to think [critically]. Like, I don't use it to just cloud over, you know, the problems I have or that I see in the world.

Invoking her struggle to reconcile her punk identity with her Christian faith, Eve claimed that she came to realize that she did not have to wholly reject conventional institutions and systems of meaning in order to be punk. One may still value and participate within them, but, as a punk, she made a commitment to do so on her own terms, choosing to embrace Christianity because of a personal volition and because it felt right to her, not because of social pressure or because others defined it as worthwhile or secure.

While realist scholars might view such sentiments as proof of Eve's inauthenticity, doing so overlooks the social constructedness of subcultural identity. Sociologists have long recognized that "in our mass society, characterized as it is by cultural pluralism, each person internalizes several perspectives" which "arise through the internalization of norms; they constitute the structure of expectations imputed to some audience for whom one organizes his [sic] conduct" (Shibutani 1955:565). Relating this to subcultural identity, Fine and Kleinman (1979) have noted that subcultures are not homogeneous, static social systems, and that subculturalists maintain multiple group memberships that structure their everyday lives. While interviewees subscribed to punk as one identity, they did not always predicate that identity on a total rejection of all things non-punk. Rather, since punks constructed authenticity through self-realization, they attempted to achieve it by symbolically rejecting cultural objects that they individually defined as problematic.

Reflexivity

Following from their commitment to rejecting the influence of mainstream socialization, informants also exhibited a dedication to leading lifestyles that were accountable to their perceived genuine selves—a value that we call "reflexivity." Punks committed to it by enacting their subjectively realized belief systems through praxis in everyday life. Drawing a sharp distinction between being and doing, they expressed disdain for people who engaged in artificial performances in order to earn social approval. In social psychological terms, informants took the view that all behavior should follow from intrinsic rather than extrinsic self-efficacy.

Interviewees insisted that they could distinguish between people who were being themselves and those who were merely performing roles for instrumental purposes. How exactly they did so remained somewhat elusive. Although informants could not identify concrete qualities of so-called performers, they did

contend that authentic individuals possessed a nonchalant, self-assured attitude. When asked how he distinguished between authentic and inauthentic punks, Dickie, for example, explained how

you can just tell, you can tell when people just don't care from when they're trying, and I think that people who are trying to be something need to stop trying and just be whoever they are. Maybe it's a confidence thing in the way you show yourself to people. Like, I definitely don't think I'm trying to do anything with my haircut right now [a mohawk], and every single person that I talk to who sees it is just like "oh." You know, they're not like, "Oh wow! That's crazy! Absurd!" You know, they're kind of just like "yeah." You know, like, it's new for me, but then they're like "yeah, it looks right." You know, it fits me.

Dickie's commentary mirrors the mysterious qualities that professional jazz musicians attribute to one another: "the musician is conceived ... as an artist who possesses a mysterious artistic gift setting him apart from all other people ... The gift is something that cannot be acquired through education; the outsider, therefore, can never become a member of the group" (Becker 1963:85-86). Elsewhere in his interview, Dickie castigated individuals who adorned themselves in normative punk style while wearing his own hair in a mohawk. He emphasized, however, that he was not posing or posturing—his hairstyle, he claimed, unlike those of some others, reflected his real, internalized self (see also Widdicombe 1993). His friends and other so-called authentic punks, he claimed, could readily recognize this. Much like the jazz musicians in Becker's study, Dickie implied that outsiders could adopt aspects of punk style, but they would not become punk in so doing. Punk merely reflected the inborn attributes of Dickie's genuine self—attributes that emphasize creation and originality in lieu of consumption and conformity.

Dickie's commentary provides insight into the belief—expressed in some form by interviewees—that style should objectify self image. Punks accomplished this in two ways. The first was through positive inner-speculation, which involved utilizing a style that *reflects* one's unique way of being. The second is through negative disidentification from persons and things against which punks collectively rebel. Given their concern with reflexivity, informants expressed extreme distaste for people who employed styles in ways judged to be inconsistent with their self-concepts. To continue to use Dickie as an example, during a punk show he encountered two young women who, in his view, were deploying images in order to appear punk, while lacking an understanding of punk ideology.⁴ Both had colorfully dyed hair, sported t-shirts donning the names of well-known punk

4 While beyond the scope of our analysis, it is important to note that the following encounter reflects past empirical work in relation to how gender dynamics operate within subcultures (see e.g., Leblanc 2001; Roman 1988). Women are regularly accused of superficiality and of possessing shallow concerns with style. That accusation has resulted in the marginalization of women within many different subcultural scenes. In the case at

bands and wore popular Converse shoes. An excerpt from field notes displays his bold, condemnatory reaction to them.

The women again turn around and try to say something to Dickie. Before they finish their thoughts, he asks how old they are. Before they can answer, he inquires if they have high school the next day; they nod. "Because I think you're fucking retarded," he replies. He then proceeds to castigate them without restraint. He tells them that they need to "shut the fuck up" and move to the back of the venue because "no one gives a fuck that [they're there]," that they remind him of the girls from his high school, and that they "act like a bunch of fucking twelve year olds." As his assault draws to a close, the pink-haired woman retorts to the effect that she hopes he gets hurt in the pit. Dickie looks stunned and appalled ... After this the women moved farther to the right of us, taking refuge with a friend. The three of them began to mock Dickie ... the gist of the conversation involving how he thought himself to be "hardcore punk rock." Their friend stood up straight, looking at Dickie, repeatedly saying "I'm punk rock" in a mocking manner. [field notes, 10/21/04]

Dickie's behavior was precipitated by disgust for their attempts to project images of subcultural membership that he suspected did not reflect their genuine selves. The teenagers' trendy clothing, he said, symbolized the culture of high school that he fervently abhorred. In an interview a few days later, he described why he had reacted against the women in that way, as well as against some other people at the show with whom he had also apparently taken issue.

I just decided they sucked—snap judgment. Like, I heard them talking, saw their crappy, cosmetic haircuts and wanted to kick their asses. I mean, it's the same idea set—punks aren't clean, they don't fucking style their hair the way they did. They're fucking filthy and dirty. They wanted to be something they weren't. They clearly came from [an affluent suburb] and went to some store in [a trendy alternative shopping area] to buy their clothes to look punk, spent hundreds of dollars on clothing and hair products, and they think they're punks, which is complete bullshit. You know, that's not true at all—they're just consumers, which to me is the worst classification. Yeah ... they're just a product of consumer society ... even when I send in the hawk, the second where it becomes anything where I have to style it, I'll just shave it off—send in the space monkey afterwards. There is no point...there's no point in having to wake up and style your hair.

Dickie wrote off the teenagers at the show as inauthentic because he thought that they "were trying to be something that they weren't." Studying concert participants

hand, it is possible that Dickie interpreted the genders of the young women as indicators of their inauthenticity, unjustly writing them off as a result.

who conformed to punk and goth styles, Widdicombe (1993; Widdicombe and Wooffitt 1990) found that several of her interviewees resisted the correlation between “membership and style [...] precisely because it implies conformity and the loss of individuality and is regarded as inauthentic” (1993:110). In our fieldwork, we found Dickie wearing a mohawk but labeling others as inauthentic because he suspected that they had bought—not created—their punk identities in order to look cool. This point represents pragmatic knowledge of the social psychological functions of social comparisons among subcultural participants. In *Beyond Subculture*, Muggleton (2002) found that subculturalists distinguished themselves from those with identical styles by claiming that their own styles came about gradually and organically, while others’ emerged suddenly. Likewise, Dickie’s claim of authenticity may be seen as “necessarily conditional upon the ‘mass media’ influenced inauthenticity of others” (Muggleton 2002:140). Interestingly, however, the two women’s response to Dickie’s attack suggested an alternate sense of reflexivity. After Dickie told them off, both women, as well as their friend, mocked him for attempting to cast himself as a “hardcore punk.” In other words, they also accused Dickie of attempting to create a perception of himself that did not accord to who they thought he really was. This incident further underscores the point that subcultural authenticity possesses no specific properties.

Given the symbolic value attached to being rather than performing punk, study participants emphatically rejected the idea of “assumed identities,” which took the form of commodities—unoriginal, constructed by others and therefore not reflexive. Informants instead asserted that one’s sense of self should emerge organically through a process of active, personal creation. When asked how he distinguished among people in the local do-it-yourself (DIY)⁵ scene, Charlie, for instance, classified inauthentic punks as

people who just aren’t initiating any new ideas, aren’t trying to create. You can see it. If there’s a lot of worship, if they treat these bands that are coming through like rock stars, it’s like you’re absolutely missing the point of this.

Punks thus forged a construction of authenticity that distinguished “real” from “fake” by virtue of the extent to which one created versus consumed. Other empirical work on punk has attributed this sentiment, which typically manifests in an acute rejection of consumerism and materialism, to a project of political resistance grounded in an anti-capitalist sentiment. Moore (2007), for example,

⁵ Participants in DIY scenes often emphasize an individualist, anti-consumptive ethic toward cultural production and everyday living. The former prong of this ethic manifests in the creation of fan zines, recording one’s own musical albums, booking one’s own tours, and so forth. With respect to the latter prong, the DIY ethic manifests in a manifold of activities ranging from growing one’s own food to making one’s own clothing. For a detailed account of the DIY ethic, see Moore’s (2007) work on variable fields of cultural production.

argued that the DIY ethos enables a public sphere among young people to develop, in which they organize themselves to express dissenting viewpoints about social issues. While several of our interviewees expressed disfavor with capitalism and used punk to cultivate symbolic space in which to challenge dominant ideology, we found that the ideas of rejection and reflexivity are much more grounded in a commitment to authenticity as a cultural ideal than to political dissent. In discussing the value and meaning of DIY as a cultural ethos, informants tended to assert that it enabled them to create their own identities as opposed to purchasing ones that were manufactured in mass culture. They also suggested that it facilitated their abilities to live by their ideals as opposed to participating in a lifestyle that was inconsistent with their ideologies. While many also extolled DIY as a means through which to subvert consumer capitalism, doing so was secondary to self-expression.

Self-actualization

The ideal of authenticity that Taylor discusses also promotes being versus doing by encouraging people to make moral commitments to self-discovery and to create and abide by individual systems of values and beliefs. We refer to this dimension of authenticity as “self-actualization.” While the punks that we interviewed tended to talk about their values and beliefs as if they derived them internally instead of from the subculture in which they participated, Taylor (1992:39) predicates self-actualization on an “openness to horizons of significance.” Informants expressed repugnance for and frustration with ignorance and apathy, which they felt were bleeding through society because of an uncritical acceptance of the status quo. Most people, they felt, never questioned their eschatological purposes or the validity of the common sense world of everyday life. In contrast, punks embraced a DIY ethic of creation, originality and self-reliance.

As Americans we’re just fed so much crap, whether it be from our families, or our church, or our schools, and from the media ... It’s not very often, even for the youth now, that they really question why it is we live this way, why are we in the position we’re in on a global scale, so I think that that’s really important for people to question the methods we use around the world ... things like that. And I think for a lot of kids, when they get into punk, that’s when they really start questioning those things and really challenging themselves—challenging their beliefs ... I mean going out of your way to read a book by Howard Zinn, or going out of your way to read Noam Chomsky or something, and maybe read an alternative history or an alternative view of religion that we’re not necessarily force-fed by school or by religion or something like that. [Glenn, interview]

This DIY ethic was constructed through a subcultural frame of reference—built through interaction with various forms of subcultural media (e.g., song lyrics and

zines) and through face-to-face interaction with other punks at events as well as in more mundane settings such as school. Glenn continued:

And definitely once you get into punk that stuff starts to happen. You get around people who challenge your beliefs and who challenge you to look into things further ... And that's why high school is such a fertile ground for punks, because you're reaching an age where you have that angst, where if you're not accepted by the majority of people in the school, you know all the refugees can go and express themselves and actually learn something new.

Although informants generally acknowledged that the subculture played a large role in the cultivation of their values and beliefs, most claimed that punk ideology took no structured form. They insisted that it simply involved staking out an informed individuality and drawing one's own conclusions about the significance of life rather than adopting prefabricated viewpoints. What those conclusions are did not seem to matter, so long as people "do their own thing."

It's kind of an oxymoron, to be punk rock and play by the rules. There aren't any rules! [...] There are some punk rockers in bands and they're Republicans—they're doing their own thing, you know? You may not agree with them ... but they're doing their own thing and they're not following a guideline—that kind of stuff. I know punk rockers that are Christians, you know, there's no rules to that sort of stuff ... You do your own thing on your own terms because of your own set of beliefs. The only motivation behind it is that you know you'll have self satisfaction from it. [Henry, interview]

From this perspective, punk ideology involved no pre-conceived set of beliefs, values or practices; it held that people should stay true to themselves and behave accordingly. This observation lends further support to contention that punks anchor their self-concepts in instincts and impulses rather than in institutional frameworks. Henry implied that the true self is revealed when a person does or thinks something solely because he or she wishes to do so. It is not, to the contrary, revealed when an individual adheres to high societal standards while resisting the pull of inner temptations (Turner 1976). When subjectively achieved, "self-actualization" brought about a sense of intrinsic self-esteem, a measure of self-worth that feels uniquely individualistic despite its social foundation (Brisset 1972).

Blake referred to his immersion in punk as "self-realization" and Cooper reported that upon discovering punk he felt empowered, finally connecting his true self to a culture that reflected it. Trevor defined a punk as someone who "holds true no matter what" and went on to discuss how that mantra had made him stronger, allowing him to discover who he was and to actualize his ideals more quickly in comparison to others who were not involved in the subculture. Rejecting dominant agents of social conditioning infused informants with a sense of liberation and

empowerment. In other words, striving to understand one's genuine self and demanding accountability to it brought meaning and understanding into the lives of the punks that we studied. The goal of self-actualization ultimately manifested in the development of a self-concept that subjectively existed outside of social influence.

Ideas of truth are really important. Punks always search for truth, but they have yet to find that truth in ... power relationships ... The truth punks seek is the truth derived from within ... a truth that creates real change. It is what we as [individuals] learn through experience ... [punk] is a utopia that can be open to all, a heaven of sorts that anyone can attain if they simply participate in the process. The process has no boundaries, it is only the everlasting quest to find truth, objective truth in the self, even if that truth contradicts the truth of another.

Here, Cooper illuminated the common punk sentiment that knowledge accrued through socialization merely perpetuates existing systems of power and privilege. Emphasizing the Romantic virtue of experience in lieu of rationality, he suggested that individuals should strive to develop self-concepts that *feel* valid and true—not ones that are socially defined as such. Punk facilitated this process by enabling participants to engage in cultural practices that reflected their inner essences. Among the punks we studied, it also encouraged a devotion to profound and extended introspection while maximizing the spectrum of experiential possibilities that accompanies subcultural participation. Returning to Turner (1976), we see how punk subculture provides participants with a forum that allows them to gratify deeply felt urges in order to subjectively experience their "real selves" while indemnifying them from institutional sanctioning.

Discussion and Conclusion

Whether as efforts to contest class positions or as adaptations to cultural strain, scholars have long associated youth subcultures with rebellion or inverted cultural value structures. Our empirical findings, however, suggest something different. Having probed informants about their ideological beliefs, we found that punks did not emphasize political resistance but rather freedom of self-expression—not as just punks, but as human beings. Recent scholarship has suggested that contemporary subcultural participation tends to be apolitical, not necessarily seeking to challenge "the system" but to pursue free expression (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Weinzierl and Muggleton 2003). Muggleton found that "punk politics [were] best understood in terms of personal self-determination" (2002:149). Likewise, the punks in our study did not frame their participation as political resistance, as doing so would imply that a calculated gesture of dissent rather than a genuine expression

of the inner self predicated their subcultural identities.⁶ However, unlike these scholars, who tend to characterize *all* subcultural life as rooted in consumption and play, we have grounded it in the modernist ethic of authenticity that in many ways derives from societal shifts in the locus of individual self-conceptions.

Gary Fine (2003) has written that the “desire for authenticity now occupies a central position in contemporary culture” (153). Similarly, scholars like Bell (1976), Lasch (1979), and Turner (1976) have noted that a devotion to self-discovery has become embedded in the value system of society at large. Just as punks seek to reconnect to the real by bypassing market relations and establishing an autonomous field of cultural production through DIY ethics, the greater lot of the Western world increasingly desires to experience things for itself. Boyle (2004) suggests that this is because humans live in a world in which people learn that the future of food is artificial, that the future of books, newspapers and medicine is virtual, and that they will soon deal entirely through computer screens rather than through people. While the punks that we studied insisted that most people are socially unconscious, tepid conformists, Boyle, to the contrary, argues that globalization has spawned a desire for anything but conformity and convention and suggests that somewhat of a revolution has occurred whereby consumers have launched a rejection of the fake, the virtual, the spun, and the mass produced. Like Turner, he claims that everyone longs for something that they can touch and put their fingers on, thereby implying that phenomena like punk will become more common as more people reject conceptions of progress that have held sway for more than two centuries. People will increasingly demand “real” human contact, “real” experience and “real” connection. This is a response to the cultural conditions of postmodernity, which call into question the assumed authenticity of selves and relationships. The drive to rediscover the “really real” challenges the postmodern notion that nothing is true and that all is for sale.

By linking punk to these cultural conditions, our work moves beyond an analysis of how subculturalists construct authentic identities, instead exploring how the broader cultural quest for authenticity and the shifting locus of self-conceptions orient subcultural participation. We found that what has ensued from the culture industry’s appropriation of punk style is an attempt by some young punks to come together in order to share in a project of self-realization in which authenticity (as punk and as a human-being) is developed through commitment to three ideological tenets: rejection, reflexivity and self-actualization. Punks constituted authenticity in terms of the integrity of their search for and practice of an inner essence, while the subculture as a whole worked to countermand the ontological insecurity that typifies the postmodern condition. The subculture may thus be understood as one

6 We do wish to emphasize, however, that the informants in our study were certainly not apolitical. To the contrary, almost all were socially conscious, and many actively participated in various political causes and movements. The argument that we advance is more nuanced, suggesting that punks do not predicate their subcultural participation on the political—that the concern with self-realization tends to supersede all else.

expression—albeit in a heightened and distorted form—of a “dominant” cultural tendency, not so much challenging bourgeois hegemony as articulating an already-prevalent cultural ideology.

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