Chapter 7: The Unknown Creed: Punk and Political Uncertainty in Northern Ireland[1]

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Abstract

Northern Ireland is often, over-simplistically, considered to be a bi-cultural society and as such the focus has been on accommodation, specifically; "the accommodation of apparent cultural differences between British and Irish, unionists and nationalists, Protestants and Catholics." (Nic Craith, 2003: 1) Accommodation rather than assimilation is favoured, but it leaves little space for those who exist and live outside those dominant bi-cultural groups. In regards to those who consciously and deliberately choose to live a lifestyle and create an identity that seeks to challenge those binaries and categories, they are at additional risk of attack and retaliation as they potentially pose a risk to the easy narrative and the use / control of power. Within punk and anarchy communities in Northern Ireland there has been a history of challenge to the very concept of a bi-cultural society and numerous attempts to demonstrate alternative conceptions of community and living that involves decision making that often put such communities at risk in a very uncertain climate. Utilising interview quotations, this chapter will be divided between an historical overview and examples from the punk community at large, before focusing on the decision to create a community within

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[1] In the interests of full disclosure, the author is both from Northern Ireland and has held punk as key to her identity since the 1990s. She grew up during the latter half of the troubles and was involved in many of the activities outlined in the chapter.

community as a form of protest and resistance through the Straight Edge movement that is centred on making an informed choice.

The History of Punk and Anarchy Communities within Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland is a relatively young country, having been in existence for less than 100 years. It was created by the British in 1922 when the six northern counties of Ireland were annexed and declared to be Northern Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom.[2] The remainder of Ireland became the Free State of Ireland and eventually a country entirely autonomous of English rule in 1937 when it became the Republic of Ireland. David Fitzpatrick describes the split as follows:

> The partition of Ireland created two states embodying rival ideologies and representing two hostile peoples. Roman Catholic nationalists acquired effective control over twenty six counties in the Irish Free State, while Protestant Unionists secured the six counties of Northern Ireland. By dividing Ireland according to the religion and politics of the local majority in each region, Lloyd George's government hoped to avert further sectarian conflict within Ireland and to absolve the United Kingdom from future responsibility for the 'restoration of order'.(Fitzpatrick 1998: 7)

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[2] This followed the first Anglo-Irish agreement signed in 1921; it took three attempts for it to pass through Parliament and the House of Lords.

Obviously the partition failed in its attempt to stop the rivalries, and in Northern Ireland in particular the identities of Catholic or Protestant, Nationalist or Loyalist, British or Irish came to define governance, communities and individuals resulting in decades of bitter war and protests. People endured bombings, shootings, false (and deserved) imprisonment, separation of loved ones, poverty in a multitude of ways and a perpetual sense of impending change and uncertainty. These decades are referred to as The Troubles, a name coined by local people to both mock and draw attention to the severity of the situation. Communities drew strength and cohesion from their community identity of Protestant or Catholic, Nationalist or Loyalist and so on. Those from outside the community were viewed with suspicion and often attacked first and asked questions later. Multiple signifiers (Baudrillard 2001) were used to denote this identity and to mark alternatives as 'other'. These ranged from clothing colours, to what foot you kicked a football with, to how you pronounced certain letters, to the colours of the kerbs and images on wall murals. Two examples are provided below.

[FIGURE 7.1 (TWO PICTURES) ABOUT HERE]

Fig 7.1. A Loyalist gable mural showing the colours of the British flag (red, white and blue) and marking the area as such and a Nationalist mural achieving the same goal through the Irish language, the colours and standard of the Republic of Ireland (Green, white and Orange for the flag and the crownless golden harp). Note both images are dominated by fighters, denoting both sides perception of a justification of battle for their land.

In addition to visual signifiers, language and meaning were also utilised both to denote identity and otherness and to inculcate both to children. For example, Catholics and Nationalists were referred to as Fenian and Tiags, while Protestants and Loyalists were called Huns and Jaffas.[3] Lyrics of popular songs and nursery rhymes were altered to become sectarian, for example, 'Home on the Range' a famous Western song is added to, changing it from:

> Home, home on the range,
>
> Where the deer and the antelope play;
>
> Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
>
> And the skies are not cloudy all day.

To:

> Home, home on the range,
>
> Where the deer and the antelope play;
>
> Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
>
> For there's no chapel to sadden our eyes,
>
> no Pope and no Priest, no rosary bead
>
> And every day is the 12th July.

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[3] Fenian and Taig both derive from Irish words, Fenian meaning warrior and Taig from tagdh meaning commoner or country dweller. Hun has its origins in the First World War being a reference to German soldiers and Jaffa is in reference to the seedless oranges, with the implication of infertility and the Orange Order.

These approaches to othering and the uncertainty it creates would later be lambasted by a range of Northern Irish punk bands in songs such as Stiff Little Fingers 'Each Dollar a Bullet,'[4] and "Wasted Life."[5] Rudi's "Cops"[6] or Toxic Waste's "We Will Be Free."[7] It is important to realise how much of a challenge punk was able to offer, in order to understand why those young people made the decision to coalesce around punk rather than familial, community or sectarian alliances or identities. There was very little, by way of popular culture or leisure activity, that enabled Protestant and Catholic to mix – especially amongst young people. Schools were segregated by gender, religion and intellectual ability; football was tribal and divisive,[8] rugby less so but also less popular and accessible for working class people. Housing was also segregated and often dance halls utilised by the communities remained the purview of that community, they did not mix with those from 'the other side'. Of course music and dancing were further divided along the lines of taste, with fights often breaking out, as they did in other countries as well, between 'rival' groups such as mods and rockers.

> People tended to stick to their own, they socialised in their own pockets so they did. There was good reasons for that, safety as you knew who was who, who was connected and so on, but also it was just easier. You have to remember that most people didn't have cars and that then so you were limited on where you could get to so you were. My da always said that he only ever went to the same three clubs, but he also talked about the fights and stuff so he did. He used to say

[4] Stiff Little Fingers, 'Each Dollar a Bullet', *Flags and Emblems,* 2004, Sanctuary Records Group. It is important to note that not all punk bands challenged this or raised it as an issue.
[5] "Wasted Life", 1978, Stiff Little Fingers, from the album Inflammable Material (Rough Trade)
[6] "Cops" Rudi, 1977 (Good Vibrations)
[7] "We Will be Free", 1986, Toxic Waste, (Mortarhate Records)
[8] For example, many Protestants would support Linfield while Catholics supported Glentoran

that the slogan was 'fly the flag, hang a mod' with his gang 'cause they were rockers, rock fans you know. Paul, 36

I loved football, played it every day, played against others from the church league and what have you but you never got to play against Catholics, they had their own league and we never mixed. You never met them, they didn't go to your school, they weren't in your youth club. They were always just 'them others'. I remember actually thinking if they even looked like people because I had no clear sense of what they were beyond their name of Catholic. I knew how to spot them and all but I dunno, it was hard to think of them as people, just ordinary people. Sounds stupid and bigoted to say that now, but well [sighs]. Matthew, 43

By 1977 the situation within Northern Ireland had deteriorated so badly that a ring of steel fences and security check points were installed around Belfast city centre, by 6pm shops and businesses had closed and the city became a ghost town. People were not usually under curfew but they were strongly encouraged to remain within their own local communities. This was coupled with '*a diet of violence, bigotry, sectarianism, paramilitary and police oppression, bad housing and the highest unemployment rate in the UK.*' (O'Neil & Trelford 2003: 3) It was an environment ripe for punk and a few record shops became the new social centres for those in love with the Ramones, The New York Dolls, The Stranglers, The Clash and The Sex Pistols. Kyle Leitch's 'Caroline Records' and Terry Hooley's 'Good Vibrations' served as gateways, not just to new musical and political ideas but as a means to meet with those from the other communities: to interact, to understand one another as people and to form allegiances

on the basis of typical teenage concerns rather than sectarian ones. A few sporadic punk venues began to spring up, The Trident in Bangor being the first obviously punk venue, followed by The Harp, The Pound (both in Belfast) and a few others. Reclamation of the night had begun. However it took a spontaneous riot to shift it from a collective into a unified community, a riot that was spurred on by the banning of the performance of The Clash in the Ulster Hall in October 1977. In response young punks formed a human chain and blocked off Bedford Street. Riot police and army responded with force, baton-charging and arrests, the result was that, 'lifelong friendships and many a band were formed that night. The kids were united and punk was on the rampage.' (O'Neil & Trelford 2003: 3)

> You have to understand how starved we were for entertainment. Most big name bands wouldn't come here for fear of being blown up or something. Beyond that though, life was just shit, there was no jobs, or at least no jobs with a future, nowhere decent to live, no way to own a house, nothing to do and nobody saying boo about it. There was no way out. Then these bands came along and they called people on it, they spoke about how shit life was and bands like The Clash offered political reasons why it was the way it was and then Crass and others they gave political alternatives, other ways to live. Gabriel, 49

> I suppose looking back now; it was actually a kinda beautiful thing. We were really tight knit, we had to be for our own safety, everyone was after us for one thing or another. It was also great fun and it seemed to offer a bright future, not

bright like being famous, but bright like colourful. An antidote to the drabness of

Belfast. Susan 52

How would I describe punk back then? It was genuinely an alternative to all the

other bullshit that surrounded us. It was a third religion; you had Catholic,

Protestant and punk. It was an alternative to sectarianism, you had a place for

anger but it didn't result in killing someone over something stupid like how they

pronounced an h. It was a radical new way to understand politics and how the

world works. And ok so no we didn't get it all right, we didn't change the world

but you know what, least we fucking tried and for a while there it was a genuine

alternative and that probably kept most of us alive or even in the country for a

lot longer. Phil 50

Of course we must be careful to acknowledge, as Phil does, that punk was not a

revolutionary movement within Northern Ireland in the sense of wresting great change

from within, although the author would strongly agree that it made an enormous

difference in the lives of her interviewees and herself. It did not, and could not, end The

Troubles, it could not change the communities that the young people came from, nor the

attitudes they were encountering daily, nor did it remove the political uncertainty of the

region.

The Limitations of Punk

Punk generally espoused a stance of anti-racism, anti-fascism, anti-sexism and anti-corporation[9], with later iterations focused on adding anti-species-ism and anti-capitalism and for some, anti-drugs and alcohol. However these were not always coherent statements and were certainly not uniform within punk. Roger Sabin (1999) criticised racist elements or attitudes within punk towards the Irish, Asians and Jews. He argues that punk cannot be re-historicised as able to transcend the societal forces that gave birth to it, and from that concludes that the interaction with anti-racist movements and activism has been exaggerated. As examples, he points to the silence of punk musicians on the racism being faced by Middle Eastern immigrants during the mid and late 70s and the exaggeration of the centrality of reggae music as an influence on punk. Sabin has been critiqued for his narrow contention that as not all punk was anti-racist it should not be labelled as such, and his failure to acknowledge the age of the participants and the limitations of their understanding of anti-racism that meant they often fell back on stereotypes which were bigoted. (Stewart, 2017: 24)

This chapter submits the argument that punk should not be viewed as either progressive or liberating except by those who choose to make it that for themselves. It had its faults and failures, as any subculture does.[10] Punk arose at a time of political and social upheaval and uncertainty throughout the whole of the UK. Savage (1991) notes that the uncertainty created by significant increases in divorce, a failing education system, the rise of power of centre-right Tory politics and politicians, unprecedented unemployment

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[9] There are of course groups who consider themselves punk who are openly far right, or against the equality of the sexes, for an excellent engagement with this readers should seek out Matthew Worley's (2013) article.

[10] The tendency of punk to view itself through rose tinted glasses has been explored in 'The Outcasts: Punk in Northern Ireland during The Troubles', Francis Stewart, in *Tales From The Punkside,* Mike Dines and Greg Bull (ed), (UK: Itchy Monkey Press 2014) p33 - 44

figures and increased ease of access to drugs are significant factors in the creation of punk. However, what punk did offer was an opportunity and that must be acknowledged; in Northern Ireland it offered 'an imagining beyond the sectarian politics…In this regards punk was not just a revolt into style. It was a revolt into the substance of a new politics.' (McLoone 2004: 32)

This new politics was largely shaped through various understandings of anarchism as a political and social ideology. Punks consciously decided to live according to the ethos of inclusivity which stood strongly in opposition to the separation that surrounded them and created barriers through religion, politics, education, where you live etc. Their decision making with regard to this ethos was undertaken in full knowledge of the danger they placed their lives in, but a belief in the power and importance of punk over-rode that. When they connected up with the anarchist community in Belfast it became even more dangerous because they became involved in decision making on issues such as animal rights which led to deliberate law breaking thus intentionally drawing further attention to themselves. Hunt sabotaging is a particular example of this, whereby protestors would use noise and presence to distract the horses and dogs without harming either. For many participants this was a key part of their punk and/or anarchist identity, yet they had consciously to make the choice to act upon their beliefs, knowing that the consequences in Northern Ireland were very different, and much more severe, than on the mainland.

> I strongly believed, and still do, that until all forms of oppression are broken then none are. I include animals in that, so yeah animal's rights was something

that a lot of us took on as a means of hitting back. We would organise groups –

so much harder back then without mobiles and social media and all that – when

we heard of a hunt happening and we would set out to sabotage it. We wanted to

make sure that horses and dogs were safe as well as the foxes, so we planned it

carefully. However we knew the land owners had brought in the police and that

if caught they would give us a hiding at the very least. It was frightening

standing there with your whistle, drawing attention to yourself, but it was the

right choice. It was a choice made from principle, and compassion and personal

safety can't override or over-privilege that.   Fiona 47

We were trying to say fuck your war, fuck your system and fuck you for good

measure. People dandered about with fuck your war painted on their jackets,

especially in the early 80s, but words are meaningless without action. Don't get

me wrong, that was a powerful statement to make in that context, but you have

to act on those principles and when I started getting involved in the anarchy side

of it, reading the material at the bookstore and what have you it wasn't enough. I

needed to act, so I began taking part in hunt sabs because I understand them as a

part of the system and thus contributing the factors that enabled the troubles to

carry on. I also saw it in line with other oppressions such as racism and sexism. I

knew there would be consequences, but to be honest, I was also young enough

not to care. The multiple arrests actually made it a nightmare years later when I

got married and we wanted to adopt a kid. Interesting how our choices follow us

for so long into life in ways we couldn't think of before. Chris 44

Choices to protest were carefully undertaken, especially in relation to song lyrics and band names. This chapter is named after a band from Carrickfergus (1983-86) whose moniker, '*The Unknown Creed*', was chosen as an anti-sectarian stance, a rarity at the time. The Defects likewise took aim at those they felt were an oppressive force in their rallying chant 'SS RUC' on the 1981 song 'Brutality'. Rudi also immortalised the same chant in their song 'Cops' which immortalised the riots caused by the cancelled Clash gig and challenged the perceived heavy-handed tactics of the police. While it could easily be claimed that these were nothing more than teenagers being rebellious, it is important to remember that these live performances would have the whole crowd chanting 'SS RUC' while the RUC and riot police were charging into the rooms, batons drawn for use and with a determination to close the gig down. Furthermore, this was taking place 30 years after the conclusion of the Second World War, making the link between the police and the SS troops a very provocative statement. Again, this was informed by anarchist understandings of state structures and how they are enforced. Of course, it is also important to acknowledge that the impact of these attitudes and behaviours was seldom noted outside the punk community itself. Paramilitary organisations paid little attention to the gigs or the punks and were uninterested in their opinion of them. Run-ins with the paramilitaries occurred in the same way they did for many other young people, chance encounters. An example of this is recounted by some of the members of Toxic Waste, who had gone into Belfast city centre and were approached by two men. A fight broke out until a gun fell from the pocket of one of the men. The young band members instantly realised he was either a paramilitary member or an undercover patrol man and tried to leave quickly, running in all directions only to find they were being chased. (Glasper 2006: 418) From this and similar experiences

punks learnt that it was a decision they had to make to be punk beyond the fashion, and to create a community together for safety and autonomy.

Attempts to galvanise and create a centre for and by the punk and anarchist communities produced, first, The A Centre, which lasted 6 months but closed due to persistent daily raids and shut downs by the army. The A Centre was a music space, a community centre that showed films and created their own fanzine (self-produced magazine) 'Inriail' and even shot their own film about the centre (Stewart 2014: 40). Shortly after it closed a second attempt was made in the creation of Warzone, which still runs today although it has moved venues. It is now primarily a music venue, a vegan café (Giros), an information centre and an activism hub run on anarchist principles.

Belfast punks had to work doubly hard to make any headway in their struggle to be heard; fearlessly anti-state in a dangerous environment where state terrorism went hand in hand with sectarian bigotry, and was reinforced with indiscriminate plastic bullets, bands such as Toxic Waste and Stalag 17 helped keep the Warzone collective a relevant, focused means of protest against a backdrop of the bleakest political climate imaginable (Glasper 2006: 418).

Perhaps the best visual example of the stance they were taking, and the beliefs that prompted them can be found on the back of a 2004 Toxic Waste live performance DVD which boldly printed the following statement:

I am not a Catholic

I am not a Protestant

I am not Irish

I am not British

I am Me

I am an individual.

Fuck your politics

Fuck your religion

I will be free

Contemporary Iterations and Decision Making

It is important that people realise how much punk mattered to us, how it helped change and shape us in a way nothing else could. It wasn't just the music, although that was a massive part of it, it was the community, the shared ethos of survival, change and liberation. But it is also dead important that the fuck ups of the community are known as well. Yeah we tried, but you also had an increasing number of individuals, especially within punk, who turned to just running around sniffing glue or rolling around puking their guts up drunk on cheap cider. Yeah we looked out for each other, we walked each other home but we also had to deal with morons within ourselves and that made it harder to view it all as a cohesive unit. We weren't all fighting for the same cause if some of us couldn't stand to fight. Gary 51

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1997) argues that communities are not necessarily based on face to face interactions, something that Northern Irish punks had to contend with. Despite the relatively small size of the country there was limited ability to move around and so it had to be assumed that when your favourite bands from Belfast went up to Coleraine to play they would meet with punks similar to those found in Belfast. There was an imagined sense of community, similarity in aesthetics, attitude and ideologies. When local groups were forced to recognise that the behaviour of some of their members was either errant or abhorrent these notions of community had to be renegotiated, as Gary indicated above.

There was no consensus on how a punk should or should not behave. As punks were arguing for, and at times practising, individualism and anti-state control, it would have been problematic and hypocritical to insist upon a dogmatic code of conduct. Some reacted by engaging more with anarchy and distancing themselves from punk. Others became less involved with punk and more involved with social activism through groups such as Youth Against Sectarianism. Of course, numerous punks did nothing, or were not upset by the behaviour of other 'drunk' punks. One particularly interesting reaction was an embracing of the straight edge movement.

Straight Edge (sXe) began as a song penned by Ian MacKaye, the teenage lyricist of Washington DC hardcore punk band Minor Threat. It was intended as a statement of his own personal life stance regarding the consumption of alcohol and drugs, but it was also

a scathing indictment of the state of punk, particularly the behaviour and attitudes of the 'drunk punk.'[11]

Regardless of MacKaye's intentions, many young punks recognised their own lifestyle or the lifestyle they wanted and began using the title of the song as a self-identifier or marker. This was followed by sXe individuals forming bands and putting on shows with each other. Eventually it became a movement or community which was entirely self-governed and self-regulated, but which demanded that adherents follow three rules: no consumption of alcohol, no consumption of drugs (including tobacco), and no engaging in casual sex. Following these rules and using sXe as a moniker is known as 'claiming edge' and is a commitment akin to a wedding vow. Once broken it is irreparable although it will seldom result in ostracism from the community unless the ex-straight edger persistently ridicules or violently attacks those who remain edge. Straight edge is typically followed by members of the hardcore punk community, hardcore so named for the type of music (louder, faster, harder) and the desire to get back to the true heart or hard core of punk that they felt had been lost through the over indulgence in drugs and alcohol and the influx of major corporations interested in making a profit while ignoring the message of punk. Often, though not always, those who adhere to a sXe lifestyle have come from a family in which one or more member is addicted to alcohol and/or drugs. In Northern Ireland, straight edge has always been a relatively small scene but very much a part of the wider punk DIY community.

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[11] 'Straight Edge' by Minor Threat, 1981 Complete Discography (Dischord Records)

I remember the band from, I think it was Portadown, god what was their name? I can't remember, but they were a sXe band, think there might have been two brothers or a brother and sister in it. Anyway, yeah they all walked around with 'DIY not UDA/IRA' painted on their jackets. I remember thinking how fucking cool that was back then and now I think yeah, it just sums the whole thing up for me. Simon 42

It wasn't a tough decision for me to be edge, I was never into drinking and all that and had watched uncles destroy their families with it. I wouldn't have known where to go to get drugs anyway, but watching the punks roll around high on glue or what not I remember being so disappointed in them and thinking if that's what punk is, fuck that. How are you challenging the system and making a better world if you are just pouring money into the pockets of people who create this shit for the purpose of keeping you dulled and stupefied. I wanted to be in a world where people had no fear going out their front door, where it was ok to mix and I didn't think that we could create that on our own anyway and we damn sure couldn't do it pissed or high. So no it wasn't a tough choice at all, it made sense to get what I wanted, what I thought punk should be about. Sharon 39

I was a little gobshite and all that, so the look of punk really drew me in first. Then I began finding out about animal rights and stuff and then moved into the more in depth anarchist stuff, but I found it really hard to align with everything going on around me. You got these English anarchists coming over telling us

what we should be doing never having walked a day in our shoes or heard a bomb going off, that really pissed me off. Then fucking Chumba come out with their plastic take on the Troubles, again never fucking lived here so who are they to say.[12] That was a real turn off to be honest; I wasn't seeing something I could be a part of. Then I got into the tape swapping thing and somehow got hold of a tape with Minor Threat on it and as soon as I heard 'Straight Edge' that was it. I got it. I understood this was the punk I wanted. The ferocity of the sound, the spitting out of the lyrics and the fucking sense that you can't change something if you haven't lived it and you haven't lived it if you've been drunk or high or distracted throughout it. That was it for me; I wanted to be a part of that. Mick 43

For me being edge was about two things, so it was. The first was breaking the cycle of abuse and addiction within the family history. The second was a sense of wanting to be myself all the time, not wanting to have done something, good or bad, and not be able to remember it or having to apologise for behaving in a way that I didn't see as really me, you know. Over time I think the second one took on more and more importance so it did. It became about finding what it really means to be a punk, to stand against the sectarian divide and to sometimes stand against the idiocy of punks. Siobhan 39

Within these quotations we can see a strong desire for an authenticity for those involved with sXe, an authenticity in lifestyle, purpose and how they understood punk as

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[12] Referring to the song 'Why are we still in Ireland' by the English band Chumbawamba

functioning within the context of Northern Ireland and their own lives. This conception of authenticity being located within sXe is strongly linked to ideas of discipline (resisting the behaviour of peers yet still rebelling against aspects of society), obedience (following the three rules) and fidelity (the commitment as a life-long intention, once broken never repaired). Often this was framed within an understanding of being aware of what was going on around them, typically expressed as clear-mindedness, both in conversation and lyrics such as "No Thanks" by Uniform Choice.[13]

It is no surprise that authenticity stands at the core of what sXe adherents in Northern Ireland were seeking, they were not only having to navigate a dangerous environment in which law was made by those elsewhere (Westminster) and those present but without authority to do so (paramilitaries) and enforced brutally, but they were constantly faced with the inadequacy of law throughout the Troubles. They saw what, for many of them, was the inauthentic nature of power and how the law (variously understood) was used (and misused) to sustain it. In addition, a major factor in the emergence of punk in the late 1970s was the reaction to the type of popular music available for consumption and being played on the radio. Punk was, amongst other things, striving for an authenticity in sound as opposed to the pomp and overindulgence of much of rock music of the era. I would argue that a desire for authenticity, in both music and message, eventually led some to a search for authenticity of the self. For this small but significant group, it was located within sXe punk, rather than anarcho-punk or the drunk punk scenes that were on the rise. Of course that is not to imply that there was an agreed consensus or understanding of authenticity within sXe or within punk more broadly.

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[13] 'No Thanks' by Uniform Choice, *Straight and Alert,* 1995, Lost & Found Records

Charles Guignon (2004) and Charles Taylor (1991; 2007) both argued that authenticity has moved from meaning a connection with a larger cosmic picture into the realm of an inward search for a true self. The concern for authenticity is no longer solely with the outward, how one fits into a wider cosmic order, but rather it is focused in modern society on finding dignity and purpose in being autonomous and self-directed. In so doing we create what Taylor refers to as 'frameworks', the means by which we make moral judgements. '*To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses … To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand.' (*1989: 26 -27) This conception of authenticity relies upon a narrativist tradition which assumes that a deep truth cannot be contested because it lies within the self and therefore privileged access is limited to the individual. It can be shared linguistically – as we see it in song lyrics and the general discourse within punk – and through other means such as totemic elements (Durkheim 2004) – such as tattoos, T-shirts, hairstyles – but it ultimately remains within. This does not sit entirely comfortably with the general politics of punk, and especially sXe punks who typically do not support relativism or exclusivity. However, we must also acknowledge that, as these final interview extracts demonstrate, sXe punks are more concerned with that which feels authentically real or true as determined through their own lived experiences, as well as how they relay these experiences in a narrative to others, as opposed to deference to an external authority.

I view it as pages of magazine, you can either see what images they want you to see – skinny models, whatever – and view that as the truth because it is there and someone has decided that is the level of perfection to be attained, or you can

skip it because it is just an ad paid for with the sole purpose of making someone money at the cost of making you feel bad in some way, skip and focus on the articles you bought the magazine for in the first place, that make sense? Like for me I understand sXe as the aspect or form of punk that encourages me to read the articles and ignore the bullshit that others decide, I will decide those things for myself. Jenny 48

Crass sang and talked about there being no authority but yourself, great, except when you live in a country in which authority is pursued and gained through the barrel of a gun and the wielding of bombs and baseball bats it sounds rather like empty words or inauthentic is probably more accurate. Don't get me wrong, I loved Crass and think it is an important message, but it was always a bit hollow for the situation here – even now when the peace process is so much under fire. There are loads of authorities and sometimes yeah, for the sake of your own life you do have to submit to them. But, for me I always found that within sXe there was an element of at least knowing what you were doing and why that I couldn't find in other forms of punk, this would have been late 80s, early 90s I'm talking. There was an authenticity to it that, for me, spoke to the situation I was living in at the time and the situation I now see my kids growing up in. Danny 45

sXe and the Role of Uncertainty

While the significance of authenticity and familial instances of addiction are important factors in causing some punks to choose a sXe lifestyle, we must also consider the role

of uncertainty itself. Familial addiction is to live with constant uncertainty or unpredictability around issues of domestic abuse, personal safety, anxiety, and conflict. When those circumstances are located within the social and political uncertainty created by the Troubles it raises further issues such as if a member of the family is a part of or has strong connections with members of a paramilitary organisation and thus could act easily of serious threats of violence. For a significant number of families in Northern Ireland addiction was further complicated because of prison sentences or internment experiences.[14]

For those punks who did not experience family issues with alcohol and / or drug addiction there was still the uncertainty of paramilitary actions, civil war and political changes to navigate on an everyday basis. The reality for all living during the Troubles was that life was precarious in a way it was not elsewhere. There was no knowing where a bomb was going to go off and when, a walk home could easily (and did) result in an unfinished journey due to frequent shootings or simply coming upon the wrong situation at the wrong time. A simple trip out had to be planned around bomb scares, checking cars for bombs put underneath them, police and army checkpoints and searches, and constant checking on the news – in other words an inability to switch off from the situation one is born into and surrounded by.

Van de Bos, Ameijde and van Gorp (2006: 333) note that, 'Security is a broad construct, and involves not only concerns about physical danger and assault but also entails psychological concerns about safety and uncertainty.' Recent social psychology

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[14] Internment is the legal holding and questioning of suspects for an indefinite period of time. It was legal practise in Northern Ireland (but nowhere else in the UK) from 1971 and was often conducted by the British Army.

research has pointed to the importance of uncertainty when trying to understand why people turn to extreme views, positions and identities. Hogg (2000; 2001; 2004; 2005) shows repeatedly that extreme levels of self-uncertainty (not just security based issues, but security threats on a personal level and / or being placed in a situation that challenges one's own worldview) can be a significant motivator in people choosing ideological belief systems that are based upon or related to orthodoxy, hierarchy and extremism. It is reasonable to assert that sXe is based in orthodoxy (both in the notion of a pursuit of, and existence of, a true hard core of punk and in the notion of a purity of mind for an authentic self) and extremism (especially in relation to acceptable behaviours and transgression). The sXers felt that their understanding of the world as a punk was under threat by the behaviours of other 'drunk punks' combined with the uncertainty of the political and social situation they had to navigate, and as such found solace or meaning (and perhaps control of some kind) in extreme beliefs, behaviours and self-identity.

Conclusion

As we continue the journey of the peace process in Northern Ireland it is increasingly coming under pressure, and violence is once again on the rise in certain areas. This is not to predict that there will be a recurrence of the troubles, but rather to indicate that accommodation has not been a successful approach to pursue. It fails because it assumes that people are easily divided into categories and communities, and do not exist within a multiplicity of identities. Fluidity of identity construction is ignored and presumptions

and stereotypes run rife. It marginalises those already on the periphery and ignores those who have alternative means of how they want their existence to be structured.

During the Troubles of the late 1970s, 80s and early 90s those who created and developed a punk identity wanted to smash the system in a way that was inconceivable and little understood on the mainland. Punk existed in Northern Ireland as both an intangible concept – a polemic against perceived societal ills and against an artistic expression (rock music) that had to all intents and purposes lost its way – and concurrently as a material reality in the music, flyers, fanzines, fashion, buttons and so on. But more than this it existed as a direct challenge to the bitter sectarian division and the lack of choice within the country. Young people took up the challenge and set about making their own decisions and lifestyles in the knowledge that they ran the risk of serious physical danger and even, possibly, death at the hands of law-makers (legal and otherwise).

It was not always a successful venture, and aspects such as alcohol and drug abuse did mar it for some. A small, but significant number of punks tried to find a new way of understanding the nature of authenticity through punk and selected the integrity they felt was located within sXe punk. This fed into their desire for a creation of their own life narrative and a turn to the self.

What this chapter has focused on is drawing out the reasons for choosing to align oneself with what could be considered a more extreme subculture, and indeed the appeal of the extreme views held within one aspect known as Straight Edge. The appeal of the

extreme views found in sXe is that we either accept that to varying degrees the social practices we are involved with impinge upon our individual freedom as selves in order to enable us to live successfully as a collective; or we must choose to reject, if one can, those intrusions upon individual freedom and view the social as simply providing the means by which we develop ourselves. The near obsession, within all aspects of punk in Northern Ireland, with community and social activism lies as testament to the choices they were making and why. It was not just about overcoming difficult lives in a war zone but about trying to find meaning in life through shared values, social commitment and communal structure. It remains to be seen if the upcoming punks of the new millennium, who did not grow up during the Troubles but are nonetheless affected by them, make similar choices or different choices for similar reasons. Legal and political changes will always make it a precarious journey, full of uncertainty, but a journey that could potentially end definitively with the next generation, should they decide to move away from the bigotry and division that once marred their country and prevent the past from shaping the future, their future.

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