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Creating an 'Alternative Ulster': Escapism and Utopia in Northern Ireland Punk Rock

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Abstract:

Northern Ireland during The Troubles (1960s-1998) was a region divided, with Catholic resistance to British/Protestant dominance creating a constant state of conflict and aggression. Barricades erected by the British military divided the capital city of Belfast into sectarian districts. Bombings and raids by paramilitary forces from both sides ensured that life was perpetually unstable and violence always loomed on the horizon. Out of and in response to this environment emerged a vibrant and energetic punk subculture during the late 1970s. The punk scene brought Catholic and Protestant youths together to share experiences in spaces shaped by music that responded to the violence of their daily lives, and rejected the sectarian ideals of the parent culture.

In this proposal I am requesting funding to conduct research in Northern Ireland into the punk scene and the ways in which it responded to the sectarianism of the dominant culture. I will be in Belfast for the Beyond Good and Evil Honors Summer Session at the end of June, and while there I will interview individuals who were involved in the scene: fans, musicians, zine makers, etc. I will also examine artifacts produced by the subculture such as fanzines and concert posters, and I will visit spaces formerly associated with the subculture. I will combine the results of this phenomenological study with existing literature on subcultural theory to analyze the degree to which the Northern Ireland punk scene created a subcultural space for unification in response to the dominant sectarian culture.

Introduction:

The 1960s were a decade of increasing political tension in British Northern Ireland as the marginalized Catholic minority sought greater political power through a grassroots civil rights movement. However, reform was not forthcoming from the Northern Ireland administration, which was staunchly sympathetic to its Unionist constituents.

The lack of political change incensed the already discontented republicans, and caused increasingly violent clashes with the regional police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Police attacks on civil rights demonstrators were followed by bombings carried out by the Unionist paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), but that were blamed on the mostly defanged Irish Republican Army (IRA). These conflicts lead the IRA to remilitarize and thus heightened the level of violence. In August 1969 Catholic and Protestant mobs attacked the opposing side's neighborhoods, burning homes and assaulting people. British soldiers were deployed and established barriers, or "peacelines" between the Catholic and Protestant neighborhoods. However, the Catholic community quickly came to despise the British troops, the violence continued unabated, and all attempts by the British government to restore order failed.[1]

The violence and conflict of The Troubles touched all aspects of life in Northern Ireland, including music. In 1975 a cover band called the Miami Showband was violently attacked by members of the UVF, an event that "shattered the myth of sectarian free music,"[2] and encouraged touring bands to steer clear of Northern Ireland. This resulted in an increase in local bands making their own music.

This newfound musical vitality coincided with the explosion of punk rock in England, spearheaded by the Sex Pistols and the Clash. The latter band's visit to Belfast in 1977 brought together Catholic and Protestant fans, and when the concert was cancelled by nervous venue owners, they rioted, for once on the same side[3]. The riot marked the beginning of a vibrant DIY punk scene in Northern Ireland.

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[1] Brian Feeney, *A Short History of The Troubles* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 2004), 43-68.

[2] Sean Campbell, "Pack Up Your Troubles: Politics and Popular Music in Pre- and Post- Ceasefire Ulster," *Popular Music Online,* (2007) accessed January 21, 2016, doi: 1357-0951.

[3] Martin McLoone, "Punk Music in Northern Ireland: The Political Power of 'What Might Have Been,'" *Irish Studies Review* 1 (2004): 29.

Punk was ideally suited to be the soundtrack of life in late 1970s Belfast. Martin McLoone explains: "If there was an element of 'the abject' about punk - gobbing, vomiting - there was no more abject place in the Western world than Northern Ireland, specifically Belfast, in 1977."[4] Youths disillusioned by the violent sectarianism espoused by their parents and peers found a new home in a subculture free from the constant aggression that pervaded their daily lives. Will Straw writes that "scenes actualize a particular state of relations between various populations and social groups, as these coalesce around specific coalitions of musical style,"[5] and no other music scene actualized this statement so vividly as Northern Ireland punk. Both Catholics and Protestants found common ground in the mass of sweaty punks thrashing around the cramped floors of concert venues in Belfast and Derry.

The music they were headbanging to, the songs that served as the foundational texts or statements of intent of the subculture, also responded to the dominant culture of division into which they were born, though this response took different forms. Most scholarly writing on the Northern Irish punk scene has focused almost exclusively on the two most successful bands to emerge out of the scene- Stiff Little Fingers and The Undertones- and the contrasting ways in which their music responded to the dominant culture of conflict.

The music of Stiff Little Fingers was highly politicized, explicitly addressing The Troubles and appealing for a utopian vision of a peaceful Northern Ireland. Such overt messaging is seen in popular singles like "Alternative Ulster":

Take a look where you're livin'
You got the army on the street
And the R-U-C dog of repression
Is barking at your feet
Is this the kind of place you want to live?[6]

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[4] McLoone, "Punk Music in Northern Ireland," 32.

[5] Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris, *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 13-14.

[6] Stiff Little Fingers. "Alternative Ulster," Rough Trade 004, 1978, Digital, spotify:track:0MDJjySh4ydA8CyFVkcF.

While agreeing with the sentiments expressed in these songs, many in the scene felt that the band was exploiting the conflict for commercial gain, using the backdrop of The Troubles to cultivate an image of "edginess" in the view of listeners in Britain and around the world.

In contrast, the music of The Undertones was escapist, with songs about teenage angst and romance. Timothy Heron describes the subversive power of The Undertones' strain of early pop-punk:

> Singing about girls, love and the woes of adolescence rather than about the conflict, and doing so in spaces shared by young Catholics and Protestants alike, can be seen as a way of resisting or at least of delegitimizing the process of cultural reproduction of both communities. In a deeply divided society, where affiliation with one of the two rival blocs was a prerequisite for social integration, where sectarian partisanship and social conformity were the modus operandi of society, non-alignment was itself a subversive act.[7]

While not directly addressing the Troubles, The Undertones were creating a truly "alternative" Ulster in their music, articulating the desires of the many youth in Northern Ireland for a more stable and normal adolescence, based on a vision of a youth lifestyle of "leisure."[8]

A few other bands with political messaging, subtle or blatant, are mentioned in various articles, but no in-depth analysis of their significance is attempted. Little or no attention is given to punks themselves who composed and shaped the subculture through their participation in it, nor were artifacts such as fanzines that were produced by the scene and the spaces like concert venues or record stores where the subculture was created.

Beginning with Dick Hebdige's blockbuster *Subculture: The Meaning of Style,* in 1976, punk has repeatedly been used as a primary case study in sociological examinations of subculture. Hebdige, characterizing subcultures as forms of subversion and negative response to

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[7] Timothy Heron, "Alternative Ulster: Punk and the Construction of Everyday Life in 1970s Northern Ireland," *Popular Culture Today*, *Imaginaires* 19.

[8] Ibid.

the dominant culture, applies semiotics and the sociology of deviance to analyze the phenomenon of working-class youth subcultures, including punk.[9] Hebdige focuses on punk's attempt to "detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms"[10] by analyzing the subculture's "style"- its music, dress, argot, and ritual. This method of broad analysis set the tone for much of the subcultural research that followed, focusing on grand narrative and broad theories based on attempts to 'read' subcultures as texts[11]. In addition, to Hebdige's *Subculture,* I will also draw on the early chapters of Chris Jenks's *Subculture: The Fragmentation of the Social* and the essay collection *After Subculture* edited by Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris. Adding a fascinating lens to the broader realm of subcultural studies, Hans Skott-Myhre's *Youth and Subculture As Creative Force* explores the potential of youth subcultures to foster positive creative force. As a counter to the modes of theorizing used in these works, I will explore David Muggleton's *Inside Subculture,* which calls for and employs a greater focus on using empirical evidence to examine youth subcultures, criticizing the sweeping certainty of Hebdige's theorizing and instead attempting to characterize subcultures as "postmodern in that they display an individualistic, fragmented, and diffuse sensibility."[12]

Parallel to researching subcultural theory, I will also explore ideas from María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan's essay "Normative Dilemmas and the Hegemony of Counter-Hegemony"- a critique of the focus on marriage equality within the gay rights movement. The essay argues that to truly subvert the heteronormativity it is necessary to "render sexuality less legible and to undermine the practices of reading sexuality produced by heteronormativity,"[13] and that a simple extension of the institution of marriage does not address the underlying causes of oppression. These ideas can be reapplied to explore the degree to which the Northern Ireland punk scene resisted sectarianism.

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[9] Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York, Routledge, 1979), 3-4.

[10] Ibid., 19.

[11] David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 3.

[12] Ibid., 6.

[13] María do Mar Castro Varela and Nikita Dhawan, "Normative Dilemmas and the Hegemony of Counter-Hegemony" in *Hegemony and Heteronormativity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), 97-105.

Using the 1970s-1980s punk scene in Belfast as a case study, I will critically examine the potential of youth subcultures to respond to and resist hegemonic dominant cultures divided along sectarian lines by creating a space for unity and imaginings of utopia. To do so I will engage the case study on two fronts of research: by drawing out connections and contradictions between existing literature on the significance of punk rock in Northern Ireland and that on youth subculture's sociopolitical possibilities, and by conducting field research in Northern Ireland- interacting with people and artifacts from this unique historical moment- to fill the gaps in the current writing on Ulster punk and create a more complete phenomenological understanding of the subculture. Was the scene truly nonsectarian? Did its members feel that membership in the scene was more central to their identity than their Catholic or Protestant background? To what degree did the stylistics of the subculture- clothing, music, writing, spaces- challenge or subvert the dominant sectarian culture?

Methods:

A key element of this research project will be a review of the existing scholarly literature- both foundational sociological texts as well as articles specific to the case study - in order to bridge the gap between subcultural theories and writings on Northern Ireland Punk. Applying these theoretical understandings of subculture will enable richer rewards from mining the text of the Northern Ireland subculture. During the first part of the summer, before leaving for Belfast, I will conduct research online and in the LMU library, and deeply interrogate both the previously mentioned texts and any new ones that I encounter, to compile as complete of a literature review as possible.

While in Belfast on the Honors Beyond Good and Evil Summer Session, I will conduct interviews with members of the 1970s-80s Northern Ireland punk scene as well as members of the current punk scene. These interviews will be loosely structured and informal, focusing on themes including the subject's participation within the scene, why they felt drawn to the subculture, and their personal views at the time regarding the dominant sectarian culture. The

results from these interviews can be compared or contrasted with the current academic narratives about the Northern Ireland punk subculture.

To round out my exploration of this specific subcultural moment, I will seek out artifacts produced during the scene, such as fanzines, concert posters, and photographs. There are a few websites dedicated to preserving the legacy of Northern Ireland punk during the Troubles that include some photos and scans of zine covers, and I will contact the curators of these websites to get access to the original documents. Zines in particular have the potential to serve as a wealth of information, since they preserve in writing the contemporary views, events, and attitudes of the subculture. My goal will be to examine and scan or photograph as many of these documents as possible, and incorporate them into my final analysis.

I also plan to visit physical locations in Northern Ireland associated with the punk subculture. Jose Esteban Muñoz suggests that "utopia is a stage, not merely a temporal stage, like a phase, but also a spatial one,"[14] and I feel that there is merit in exploring the physical spaces the scene occurred in. My final itinerary will be determined by the schedule of the Beyond Good and Evil course, however I plan to visit sites including the spaces (many now demolished) that shaped the subculture, including the former sites of the Harp Bar and Good Vibrations record store. I also plan to visit contemporary arts spaces such as the Black Box which continue the tradition of Northern Ireland Punk. Depending on scheduling, I plan to use one day in Northern Ireland to travel by bus to Belfast's Catholic counterpoint Derry, to visit venues such as the Casbah Rock and the Nerve Centre.

Expected Results:

By conducting both field research and a literary review of the punk subculture in Northern Ireland, I hope to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this specific historical phenomenon. I expect to uncover the voices of the less successful bands, the fanzine creators, and the punks themselves. This information gained from field research can be set against the current academic writing on the scene, and I expect to be able to use it to examine

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[14] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Eternity,* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 99.

and critique this writing. It can also be used as evidence for further studies. Finally, I will produce a written research report, as well as a paper of the caliber necessary to be submitted for publishing in an academic journal.

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