

“This is England”: Punk rock’s realist/idealist dialectic and its implications for critical accounting education

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Abstract

This paper studies the lyrics of two songs from the Clash, one of the two most important bands from the U.K.’s ‘first wave of punk’ scene. The paper interprets the songs within their institutional, social, economic and political context, i.e. pre-Thatcher and Thatcher Britain. I then draw out the implications of the Clash’s punk ideology for critical accounting educators today, and especially the implications for ethics education. The Clash’s message and moral compass are especially relevant today as (like the Clash’s England) both Bush’s America and an immediately post-Howard Australia have been vastly altered by a harsh neo-liberalism under which alternative (and especially collectivist) voices have been frequently mocked and suppressed. The Clash was able to simultaneously be both realist and idealist and, whilst this contradiction captured the hearts of many, the classic line-up of the band was to disintegrate under the weight of its own contradictions. The critical accounting community is reminded to continue to aspire to both aspects of the realist/idealist dialectic that is so vividly apparent in the Clash’s powerful and poignant early work and especially from the self-titled debut album up to *Sandinista!*

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The middle classes invented the commodity. It defines our ambitions, our aspirations, our quality of life. Its effects are repression – loneliness – boredom.

Malcolm McLaren, future Sex Pistols manager, “Intentions for film” (May 1971).

Many of the most influential commentators on postmodernism (David Harvey and Frederic Jameson among them) have stuck with this privileging of individual artistic output as a way of mapping a social world that is otherwise difficult to see. Artistic output, because it condenses the vast scales of society into the visible registers of the work’s material form, can be used to read the social totality (Martin, 1998, p. 83).

1. Introduction and literature review

This paper investigates the value system and ideology of the ‘*first wave of punk*’ (Heylin, 2007, pp. 179, 447) (music) movement of the mid- to late-1970s and considers what insights or lessons it might hold for critical accounting education.¹ I study the lyrics of a band considered to be at the epicentre of the first wave of punk movement during the

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¹ The first live gigs played by the three leading bands of U.K. punk’s first wave were: The Sex Pistols 6 November 1975 (at St. Martin’s School of Art, 109 Charing Cross Road, London WC2; Antonia et al., 2006, p. 30; Savage, 2005, pp. 129, 143); the Clash 4 July 1976 (at The Black Swan

period under review (1977–1982) – the Clash – as well as band interviews and other secondary sources, and relevant song lyrics of other important punk acts such as Rancid and Transplants. The Sex Pistols and the Clash were, by some considerable margin, the two most important bands of the U.K.-based first wave of punk, typically defined as 1976–1978 (Gilbert, 2004; Heylin, 2007; Lander, 2006; Savage, 2006).² Both bands can rightfully be regarded as the founding fathers of today’s punk and hardcore punk movements. Steve Severin, an early punk scene identity, stated to the authors of the Johnny Rotten/Lydon biography *Rotten: no Irish, no blacks, no dogs* in 1994 that he felt that no music movement since punk’s first wave had been able to present “such an awesome ideology and attitude” to the music world and to the broader society (cited in Lydon et al., 1994, p. 185). Never before or since has the world of popular music disrupted the lives of the non-musical in such a profound way. In Severin’s words, “I keep waiting to see if something as powerful, as equally meaningful, will happen again, and I haven’t seen it”.

It is in the message and the history of the Clash that punk rock’s realist/idealist dialectic is most apparent.³ For most of their career, the members of the Clash endeavoured to hold on to both the realist and idealist aspects of their position simultaneously. As such, they were in some ways a living contradiction and the pressure of living out a seemingly contradictory position took its toll, wearing out the band and leading to the eventual disintegration of the classic line-up in 1982. It can be truly said that the Clash fell apart under the weight of its own contradictions. Despite this, the band gave hope to many of society’s underclass and left-leaning intellectuals during a dark period of neo-liberal excess under Thatcher (Emery, 2007, chap. VI). The Clash’s popularity, sales success and long-term influence suggest that they have and had an important message and one that resonates with a large section of the community. Their message in fact speaks directly to the spiritual yearnings of their hearers who long for release from the oppression, isolation, disenfranchisement and boredom of the contemporary globalized capitalist system (Emery, 2007, chap. VI).⁴

The Clash is extremely relevant today because the neo-liberalism of Howard’s Australia and Bush’s America both bear striking similarities to 1980s Britain.⁵ The neo-liberal agenda under the Prime Ministership of John Howard (1996–2007) captured large sections of the Australian media; alternative voices (especially collectivist voices) were largely mocked and silenced in public debate and in the newspapers during the Howard years. The Clash’s boldness, good humour, compassion, egalitarianism, and indeed their moral values can give hope and strength to those in Australia today who reject the harshness of the nation that Howard steadily moulded into his own reactionary image during his seemingly never-ending four terms in power (Maddox, 2005, p. x). This paper aims to discover what the Clash’s moral values were, why the band spoke directly to the hearts of so many people, and how contemporary critical accounting educators can best learn from the band and bring its radical moral compass into the classroom.

My research into the popular punk rock literature indicates that in its early days the punk community was characterized by the following normative ethical values: (a) do-it-yourself (DIY) work-ethic and “aesthetic” (Antonia et al., 2006, pp. 117, 120, 166, 278; Heylin, 2007, pp. 85, 265–266, 575–576; Lydon et al., 1994, p. 273); (b) distrust of the political institutions of the Welfare State (Emery, 2007, chap. VI); (c) anti-capitalism and anti-alienation inherent in the capitalist production process (regarding capitalist-created alienation see Marx, 1973, pp. 162, 452–455, 515, 831–832, 1975, pp. 327–330; Robertson, 1977, pp. 372, 416–418; Wallace & Wolf, 2006, pp. 87–89); (d) “street-level viewpoint” or “emotive proletariat spirit” (Myers, 2006; see also Heylin, 2007, p. 21); (e) compassion for the marginalized; (f)

in Sheffield supporting the Sex Pistols; Antonia et al., 2006, p. 67; Gilbert, 2004, pp. 95–96; Heylin, 2007, pp. 126–127, 132); and the Damned 6 July 1976 (at The 100 Club, Oxford Street, London W1 supporting The Sex Pistols; Antonia et al., 2006, p. 30). Music journalist Caroline Coon regards the Sex Pistols, the Clash and the Damned as the “three prongs” of punk: the Pistols had the personal politics, the Clash the real politics and the Damned the theatre, camp, and good fun (cited in Lydon, Zimmerman, & Zimmerman, 1994, p. 108).

² Heylin (2007) is the most detailed reference book on punk released to date. Heylin’s (2007) book has a pro-Sex Pistols, pro-Damned tone, but Heylin is clearly not as upbeat about the Clash whom he labels “po-faced” (p. 198). Heylin (2007, p. 147) fails to be convinced by the Clash’s “quasi-political shtick” and he labels their fans “a (largely reactionary) set of souls”.

³ The paper’s emphasis on the Clash is not to deny the importance of the Sex Pistols to the first wave of punk. Dave Ruffy, a punk scene identity from the first-wave, speaks thus about the continued relevance of the Pistols’ message in the mid-90s: “The whole thing about English society is that if you’re a poor boy, you’ve got nobody to tell you that you can do anything. . . . No one is there to encourage you. The important thing about the Sex Pistols is that they were years ahead of today’s realities. ‘No future’ is much more of a reality for more people now than it was then” (cited in Lydon et al., 1994, p. 224).

⁴ Regarding instinctual yearnings for release from capitalist oppression, Harman (1997, p. 32, chap. 1, emphasis added) writes that “[t]he [working] class as a whole is constantly engaged in *unconscious* opposition to capitalism” whilst Cliff (1997, p. 68, chap. 3, emphasis added) in the same volume talks about this class being oppressed by capitalism “materially as well as *spiritually*”.

⁵ An anonymous reviewer for this paper points out correctly that outsider music of dissent and solidarity has had a long and colourful history that definitely to a certain extent predates punk’s first wave.

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