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American Values and American Hardcore Punk in The Crisis of the 1970s

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1. “Double rupture”

« There was a strong sense of urgency, like there was gonna be no tomorrow so you had to give it all you got. », Sal Canzonieri (Rebel Rouser Records, Irvington, NJ)

« There was this sense of urgency to have something else because arena rock was all there [...], clubs were doing disco and, you know, there was just no place for us misfit. », Kira Roessler (ex-Black Flag, Los Angeles, CA)

« We weren't into the fashion as much as we were into the approach and intensity and urgency. », Ian MacKaye (ex-Teen Idles, Minor Threat, Dischord Records, Washington DC)

« Their [Black Flag] songs are about urgent feelings that any punk can relate to. », Tim Tonooka, interviewer de Black Flag pour le fanzine *Ripper*.

We very often come across the word “Urgency” when early American hardcore punk musicians or fans are talking about the early 1980s. Urgency, that is, according to the Oxford dictionary, “(1) the quality of needing to be dealt with or happen immediately”; (2) the feeling or belief that something needs to be dealt immediately¹”. They use the term to talk about the feeling they had in general at the time, from which their subculture emerged, or, more specifically, to complain about the **complacency** that reigned in the life of the ‘suburban middle class’, from which they actually came. As American historian and social critic Christopher Lasch witnessed in 1979, this suburban middle-class complacency had in fact grown out of a disillusionment, anxiety and fatigue that dominated the American society in the aftermath of economic, political, and social turmoil of the 1960s and the early 1970s. Disillusionment with the past, indifference to the future: we may call this a “double rupture”. The result was the dominant obsession with living for the present moment: people had to retreat into purely personal concerns (physical and psychological) and had lost the consciousness of historical continuity: Also, the traditional Protestant virtues such as work ethic, sobriety, self-discipline,

¹ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/urgency?q=urgency>

deferral of gratification was then replaced by the search for immediate satisfaction, and that pleasure that can be obtained ‘right now’ in the consumer society.

- Individualisme et D.I.Y (Do It Yourself) dans le punk.

Writing about the early evolution of punk culture in the suburban area of Southern California, Dewar MacLeod used the term “radical individualism” as it characterizes American youth of the late 1970s. Generally, they considered their life as worse than their predecessors’ in the 1960s, who had been able to live on different types of larger social connections. He says, “Unlike their counterparts in the sixties, they refused to take part in any kind of social action, feeling no sense of attachment to or ownership of the world around them. In contrast to the idealism and socially oriented thinking of sixties youth, youth in the seventies embraced a radical individualism that was critical of pretty much everything.”

This radical individualism justified and stimulated the so-called D.I.Y ethics, since the latter allowed young people to withdraw from social or political issues. The radical individualism restricts individuals to their daily activities, that can be carried out on a “personal” level or among a limited number of people. Interestingly, however, as these individual “entrepreneurs”, in the name of hardcore punk, were challenging or escaping the intervention of the mainstream recording industry, based on DIY production and ethics, they rediscovered a significant part of the American heritage due to their implementation of its old values: “self-made man”, “work ethic”, “sobriety”, “self-discipline”, and even “deferral of gratification”, most of which the 60’s counterculture had despised. One could say that in this era of multi-faceted crisis, from a feeling of, or a desire for, the “double rupture” from both the past and the future, associated with a post-modern radical individualism, the hardcore punk entrepreneurs found themselves on the old paths with an old, pre-modern tenets of individualism. We aim to explore this phenomenon by examining the cases of Black Flag and Minor Threat, two seminal early American hardcore punk bands, one from Hermosa Beach, Southern California, the other from Washington DC, and their labels, respectively, SST and Dischord Records.

- **Work ethic of Black Flag**

Born in 1954, Gregory Regis Ginn, founder, guitarist, and main songwriter of Black Flag, was not interested in music, let alone the guitar, until he was 18 years old. He was more into electronics, and from the age of 12, Ginn has been an “entrepreneur” in electronics, who ran his

own company, Solid-State Transmitters, to sell amateur radio equipment, which would later turn into SST music label to release the first record of his band. Originally called Panic, Black Flag was founded by Ginn and his high school friend Keith Morris, born in 1955, as the singer, with their first jam around the summer of 1976. However, the band has never had a regular bassist until Gary Arthur McDaniel, alias Chuck Dukowski, born in 1954, joins the band in about a year, summer of 1977. According to Keith Morris, they only became a real band when Dukowski became their bass player. Morris says, "Practice was never a priority before Chuck came along. He transformed our work ethic, our whole mentality. We started practicing five, six, seven nights a week." A little more than two years later, in November 1979, Morris left the band especially because he could not stand the band's work ethic represented by endless rehearsals while barely playing in public, and very soon he started a new band called The Circle Jerks, with the motto that "No pressure. Let's party and have a good time." As can be seen in their *Slash* magazine interview in September 1979, all the members were very conscious about their hard work, both for the band's rehearsal ("5 days a week") and for living.

The second singer Ron Reyes, who grabbed the mic right after Morris's resignation, quit the band himself less than a year later, according to him, due to the excessive violence from the audience he used to confront as a front man. However, as we can gather from the other band members' interview in September 1980 (with new singer Dez Cadena), the crucial difference leading to their separation seems to lie in another issue: that is, the question of the values, the question of the attitude, mentality, or, in other words, the "personality" as a musician. For the other members of the band, the two former singers left because "they don't like their new songs; they wanted to stay the same, to keep repeating what they have already done". The idea behind this requirement for "new songs" is to look for something new all the time, never to stop moving from one stage to another, with a certain level of confidence, despite whatever unfavorable situations. A higher value or priority seems to have been established around the words "new songs". As we can see from Dukowski's words, those things are not to be earned without hard work, and one should be willing to wait for the reward or gratification that could be delayed until one does not know when. In this regard, their musicianship and their propensity to hard work now takes on a certain moral sense, even a spirituality, as Max Weber notes as to the notion of a "calling". Keith Morris never says he didn't want to work at all, but didn't want to work without any rewards. While Morris's vision or desire at the time represents a "hedonistic" work ethic, like, this hard work ought to be rewarded immediately, that of Dukowski, and that of other members who approved of this vision, exhibit a Weberian work ethic.

While the beginnings of the band Black Flag were mainly motivated by the desire for immediate satisfaction, the desire to play in front of the audience could not be satisfied until very late. The long-awaited recording sessions continued to be stalled by a series of problems, sometimes internal, sometimes external to the band, and each recording sessions were only partially completed, which would cast the band into a certain sense of urgency, even further. Their concerts have become increasingly violent and threatening, partly due to their conflict with the police, partly due to the violence from the audience, both of which were mainly provoked by the media. But what is most interesting here is that despite, or rather thanks to these problems, a sort of alchemy took place, by which these obstacles were transmuted into this ethic of perseverance and self-discipline, an ethics that came out of it even more galvanized. The work ethic and self-discipline of the members of Black Flag and SST label has also been mentioned several times by Henry Rollins, Black Flag's fourth singer who joined in 1981.

- Work ethic and self-control in Dischord Records and Ian MacKaye

Such work ethic can also be found in Ian MacKaye, born in 1962, a central figure of DC hardcore punk scene, the straight edge movement, and the label Dischord Records he cofounded with Jeff Nelson in 1980. From the outset, Dischord Records produced records faster than any other independent label at the time, beginning with *Minor Disturbance* EP by Teen Idles, MacKaye and Nelson's former band.

Such enthusiasm as regards « work » is revealed more clearly in a later interview with Daniel Sinker, at the time MacKaye was enjoying unexpected commercial success with his new band Fugazi. Here, he links the notion of “hard work” to the DIY attitude that Dischord Records and all his former and present bands have represented.

These expressions from MacKaye, which evoke the similar attitude of the members of Black Flag, especially that of Dukowski, remind us, once again, of Weberian work ethic as a means of survival, which consists in overcoming obstacles, disadvantages, related to certain social and cultural conditions, by means of firm self-discipline and sobriety.

Whether MacKaye likes it or not, Straight edge has spread wider than he had ever expected. It has also become transformed, and even dogmatized. The idea of straight edge can be summed up in “self-control”: “controlling things and not letting them control you”² It is therefore not a

² Ian MacKaye, cité par William Tsitsos, « Rules of Rebellion: Slamdancing, Moshing, and the American Alternative Scene », *Popular Music* 18, n° 3 (octobre 1999), p. 404 ; Azerrad, *op. cit.*, p. 140. À l'origine in *Flipside* 1982.

question of doing or not doing this or that, specifically, but a question of deciding for oneself by virtue of ideal principles that are particularly personal and individual.

The dominant passion of living for the present moment, as Christopher Lasch said, among those who “have retreated into purely personal concerns”, or the “radical individualism”, as MacLeod remarks, under the disillusionment of idealistic counterculture could have been the prerequisite for what was about the straight edge: this idea, vision and principle, applied at the level of daily life, comes from the intensity of a certain desire, that of focusing on the individual, on one’s own body and one’s own mind, not to be dominated by any addiction to drugs, alcohol, but also casual sex.

This self-control also manifests itself in music. In his review of one of the first concerts of Minor Threat, MacKaye and Nelson’s new band after the Teen Idles disbanded, Howard Wuelfing, publicist and rock commentator, explains the transition between the two bands in terms of an “extreme precision”. The recent analysis of Minor Threat’s music by Shayna Maskell also points out the control and mastery, in particular of Lyle Preslar’s guitar playing, in spite of the extremely fast tempo of their songs.

As Robert Walser rightly points out for heavy metal, virtuosity, technicity, speed and precision in rock are based on a mastery of oneself, in other words on a certain spiritual elevation in an individual. If Walser proposes virtuosity and control as criteria to distinguish metal from punk, it would be too simplistic to consider that punk and hardcore punk have nothing to do with virtuosity or control. It should not be forgotten that thrash metal is not the result of a simple linear evolution from hard rock or heavy metal; the birth of thrash metal cannot be explained without reference to the influence of hardcore punk, which brought into 1980s’ rock music in general not only an unprecedented speed, but also a certain “spiritual” dimension, that is, not the idealistic one from Sixties, but in favor of a virtue of austerity, a virtue of discipline and control.

- *Straight edge* et retour à la religion chez les jeunes

On the other hand, there is no denying the religious dimension of straight edge,³ which is conditioned by one of the cultural paradigms of the time. As Ross Haenfler, sociologist and straight edge practitioner acknowledges, the “self-control” of straight edge evokes what American society has maintained since its foundation: i.e. puritanism. Let me quote some of

³ Cf. Sur les pratiquants contemporains du *straight edge* comme substitution de la religion, voir Francis Elizabeth Steward, « Punk Rock Is My Religion », thèse de doctorat, University of Stirling, 2011.

Weber's well-known characterization of Anglo-American Puritanism and its "rational asceticism". Weber considers the virtue of self-control established by Puritanism and asceticism, as forming at the moral level of the individual. The virtue of self-control is putting the whole way of life in order by bringing awareness and lucidity to the latter, and it expresses the urgency of defining this awareness and this lucidity as a crucial part of Christian ethics.

Of course, it is very difficult to determine whether, how and to what extent the 60's and 70's Christian fundamentalist movement has influenced straight edge. In this presentation, we would like to propose to see all these different movements as part of a deeper and broader phenomenon, like what many theologians name "Great Awakenings. According to the definition of William G. McLoughlin, "Awakenings" are, as "the most vital and yet most mysterious of all folk arts", "periods of cultural revitalization that begin in a general crisis of beliefs and values and extend over a period of a generation or so, during which time a profound reorientation in beliefs and values takes place"⁴. While revivals are a properly Protestant experience, which involves "conversion, salvation, regeneration or spiritual rebirth", the Awakening is not restricted to Protestantism alone, nor even to Christianity, but rather it is the result of critical disjuncture in the self-understanding that Americans had in the face of such a brutal crisis and change that upset their entire society.

According to Gerhard Ringshausen, a return to religion would have manifested among young people in response to the "68 generation". But such religious elements were already present in the American popular culture in the 1960s: a varied mixture of Eastern and Christian traditions in search for the absolute. "Awakening drug" of Timothy Leary could also be referred to in this sense. Ringshausen also underlines the religious tendency in 70's American youth culture in comparison with the situation in Germany where this religious American pop culture was imported but its popularity didn't reach such level.

Given that this movement exerted a great influence throughout the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and that a series of phenomena (not limited to Christianity) attest that many young people then actively embraced various religions and spiritualities, the role of this ubiquitous religious atmosphere should not be neglected in understanding the context in which the doctrine of straight edge emerged, even if its proclaimer was himself far from being a practitioner of any particular religion. Examining in detail MacKaye's family background, in

⁴ William C. McLoughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607-1977*, Chicago/Londres, University of Chicago Press, 1978, p. xiii.

particular his father's profession and religious activities, Michael Azerrad suggests with insight how this non-religious MacKaye could relate to Christianity. It is no exaggeration to detect Christian roots in the attitude and method a person adopts to attain a certain degree of self-control and sobriety, especially when that person grew up in strong family ties where a Christian spiritual influence dominated.

- Instead of conclusion

Still, it is not easy at all to draw any conclusion about to what extent and in what ways these values in American hardcore punk are related to American values in general, or the American identity, if we're allowed to distinguish an overall concept, despite the undeniable diversity of American life in terms of race, class, gender, geographic region, etc. Or, would this difficulty lie in an uncomfortable feeling of trying to reduce multi-leveled, pragmatic, everyday life and events to a certain transcendental idea?

Otherwise, could we think of this religious, or quasi-religious attitude, not as an act imposed directly from outside by religious dogma, but as something that permeated the whole way of life in general, and so widespread that it might have lost its original "transcendent" character? Quoting Tocqueville's remark that "the spirit of America is in its way of life", Jean Baudrillard writes in the 1980s after his own trip to the United States, about a utopia which was realized in an entirely materialistic and pragmatic way. In this state, religion "can no longer be questioned, or questioned on its foundations, questions that tend to be idealistic or transcendent in European countries. In the United States, for the French philosopher, it is religion as a way of life, or a way of life as religion.

After all, if the words spouted by American hardcore punk protagonists in the era of crisis, and their acts that prove these words, appears to contain a transcendent, utopian sense, wouldn't it be because the highest level that these self-made entrepreneurs aimed to reach in terms of creation and exchange of products *is* the utopia in itself, not in the transcendental sense of traditional religions but in the totally and thoroughly materialistic and pragmatic sense in the "New World"?

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