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The Hegelian Dialectics of Punk

*Melanie Sabbah*¹

By the summer of 1976, the music which had been the driving force and epitome of the 1960's utopian vision and revolutionary-minded social and political protest, appeared to have become an out of touch industry, disconnected from everyday reality. Against this backdrop, punk unleashed its unfurling rebellious energy, and "created moral panic" before quickly "degenerating into a freak show for the voyeuristic".² A quintessentially counter-cultural movement characterised by the downright rejection of conformity, punk's youthful energy is a product and legacy of rich cultural and philosophical traditions. In an attempt to understand and learn from such a movement, philosophical analysis

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² McNair (2006)

emerges as an unusual, albeit effective, method. Punk is an archetypal and particularly visually distinctive example of enduring behaviour in cultural trends. It is with reference to Hegel's exposition of Dialectics, bearing in mind the particular function Art occupies in his philosophical system, that I shall seek to explain and understand punk. Further, it is through the lens of punk that I shall seek to best understand the operation of Hegel's dialectics and the timeless relevance and presence of punk as cultural-defying attitude.

Hegel's Intellectual Framework

Hegel's logical doctrine has three sides, Understanding, Dialectical and Speculative, which "do not make three parts of logic, but are stages or 'moments' in every logical entity, that is, of every

notion and truth whatever”.³ Dialectics are the manner in which life operates and moves forward, and the logical process by which reason manifests itself. They are the process by which the notion of the historical unfurling of the *Absolute Idea*, central to Hegel’s philosophical system, is manifest. Indeed, “wherever there is movement, wherever there is life, wherever anything is carried into effect in the actual world, there Dialectic is at work”.⁴ In the Hegelian system, dialectics are the logic which permeate development. “It would be truer to say that Dialectic gives expression to a law which is felt in all other grades of consciousness, and in general experience”.⁵ This attests to the constant forward movement of society and of thought. Further examination of this notion of dialectics, with reference to the role art and philosophy play in

³ Hegel, 1830, §79

⁴ *Ibid.*, §81

⁵ *Ibid.*

Hegel's system, helps understand social and cultural processes.

The first side of Hegel's logical doctrine is Understanding. "Thought, as understanding, sticks to fixity of characters and their distinctness from one another".⁶ Understanding pertains to a premise, a state of affairs in the world. In the Dialectical stage "these finite characterisations or formulae supersede themselves, and pass into their opposites".⁷ By Dialectic, Hegel means the "indwelling tendency outwards by which the one-sidedness and limitation of the predicates of Understanding is seen in its true light, and shown to be the negation of them".⁸ By studying the things in their "own being and movement", dialectics "demonstrate the finitude of the partial categories

⁶ *Ibid.*, §80

⁷ *Ibid.*, §81

⁸ *Ibid.*

of understanding'.⁹ It brings to light the inherent tensions, negations and one-sidedness of any given predicate. The final stage is the Speculative stage, that of positive reason. It “apprehends the unity of terms (propositions) in their opposition”.¹⁰ The result of this has a definite content, and is something that is reasonable, and involves the logic of Understanding.¹¹ The speculative stage in a certain sense unifies the previous stages in a way that both “preserves them and avoids their different forms of one-sidedness”.¹² The Speculative stage will in turn serve as its own predicate, and as the source of a new dialectical unfurling.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §82

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Singer, 1983:102

Why Punk?

2016 marked the fortieth anniversary of the first ‘Summer of Punk’. As a cultural phenomenon, punk was much more than just a musical movement. “Just as the rudimentary DIY snarl of first wave punk bands was a refutation of decadent stadium rock ostentation and novelty hit banality – popular music’s order of the day mid-1976 – so its visceral manifestation was equally raw, visceral, dynamic and homespun”.¹³ Much of punk music has not, as standalone art, stood the test of time. What remains in collective imagination is punk’s performative aspect, its loud and firm rejection of the Establishment and its vociferous outrage. Music and other art forms were the means of expression of social strife. Mid 1970’s Britain was “still dominated by a suffocating conservatism inherited

¹³ Sheppard, 2016:12

from the 1950s”.¹⁴ Young people were bored and resigned to their fate. The nihilism that defined punk was a direct challenge to this state of mind, “restoring a sense of danger and excitement to the business of being young”.¹⁵ Punk emerged as a product of a social context and expressed both a certain worldview and the rejection of another. As such, punk epitomises what counter-culture is.

“Behind the façade of ‘punk’ remains a generation that felt compelled to question the systems and beliefs that had cohered in Britain as 60’s counterculture optimism inexorably ossified into dreary 70’s pessimism; a generation whose desire for change would challenge the social constructs that defied ‘the norm’ across music, art, politics, fashion, beauty and sexuality”.¹⁶ We recall punk as

¹⁴ McNair (2006)

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Lara Monro:41

being the proper of young “nihilistic hooligans, spitting and slam dancing in sweaty back rooms, angry at the world, and seemingly angry with each other”.¹⁷ We think of its deliberate provocation, for provocation’s own sake, and of its distinctive aesthetic, of which DIY was an essential component. Yet, the way we remember it is somewhat nostalgic, and removed from the society-shaking movement it was.¹⁸ “Punk quickly becomes that which it sought to destroy if we drape it in Union Jacks and consign it to tourist-friendly retrospective exhibitions”.¹⁹ It was a movement that sought to undermine the status quo and expressed itself through art. Such an attitude cannot be said to be the proper of punk alone. As an attitude, rather than a specific cultural subset, the word punk “might be used as a lazy shorthand

¹⁷ Edwards, 2016:38

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Holman, 2016:18

for a catch-all fuck-you attitude”.²⁰ Indeed, “at the very core of punk is a pearl of energy and a passion that can only be celebrated”.²¹

Art and Self-Expression in the Hegelian System

Hegel’s lectures on Aesthetics are the “culmination of a tradition that assigned immense importance to art in the historical advance of mankind and of his awareness of the world and his place in it”²², asserting the mutual influence of art and society. Art, for Hegel, has a dual role in producing social harmony and driving social change: its true task is to “bring to consciousness the highest interests of the mind”.²³ Art, as expression and sensuous embodiment of Geist (the Absolute Idea), articulates the worldview of its time and leads to an

²⁰ Edwards, 2016:38

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Inwood, 1993:xii

²³ Hegel, ILOA, XXII

understanding and acquaintance with the Absolute Idea: it is central to bringing society into its worldview. “It is in works of art that nations have deposited the profoundest intuitions and ideas of their hearts; and fine art is frequently the key to the understanding of their wisdom and of their religion”.²⁴ This sets forth art as a driver of social change; when the worldview it expresses is no longer adequate, art will be a means by which a new social dialectic is expressed, potentially leading to social breakdown, allowing progress in the development of human self-consciousness.

Hegel demonstrates an understanding of the influence art can have in shaping society, bringing people into the worldview, and in driving social change. Art recognises the human need to self-perfect, by outgrowing its understanding, and to

²⁴ *Ibid.*

express its self-consciousness in an objective, external, and sensuous manner. This understanding is pertinent in understanding the punk movement as a whole, as well as punk as an attitude of defiance which necessarily must be expressed for a dialectical forward moving of society.

“Punk’s Spiritual Mothership”

Jamie Holman sees the first glimmer of the punk ethos in the responses to the industrial slaughter of the First World War.²⁵ He credits the Dada movement as being “punk’s spiritual mothership”. Dadaism was “about more than making provocative art in exile”. As Dadaist Hugo Ball expressed it, “for us, art is not an end in itself (...) but an opportunity for the true perception and

²⁵ Holman, 2016:18

times we live in”.²⁶ The direct links between punk and Dada are quite obscure, but it is the attitude it reflects which is strikingly similar. Both movements espouse ideas that reject dominant cultural trends, in their broadest sense, encompassing the arts but also the political and social landscape. Both reflect a broader dissatisfaction with the dominant worldview. Such dissatisfaction is an essentially dialectical manifestation, and hence is not limited to a place in time. Andrew Hussey credits the Situationists, a movement spearheaded by Guy Debord from 1957 to 1972, for introducing the “real” politics into punk.²⁷ The Situationist movement “believed in cultural subversion and changing the world through art”.²⁸ It stressed the importance of the individual, and the critical creative outlet art can provide to all: “Everyone

²⁶ *Ibid*, quoting Hugo Ball

²⁷ Monro, 2016:41

²⁸ *Ibid*.

will be an artist... everyone will construct his own life”.²⁹ This idea of “making daily life a creative, continuously original experience”³⁰ has informed much of the art which emerged in Europe from the 1960’s onwards.

Punk was not the first, nor the last, counter-cultural movement to shape the twentieth century. Before it came 1960’s counter-culture, credited with bringing “a healthy distrust for the Establishment”.³¹ Counter-cultural movements are characterised by a way of life and set of attitudes opposed to or at variance with the contemporary social norm. It is common wisdom that each new generation will reject the previous one, and this tendency is observed and verified through such movements. It is the attitudes observed within

²⁹ Monro, 2016:41

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Miles, 2016:117

them which remains a constant, rather than what the movements espouse. Barry Miles defines the 1960's underground as "a catch-all sobriquet for a community of like-minded individuals, most of whom had a common interest in recreational drugs".³² This counter-culture eventually congealed, and in contrast to it, as a means of self-expression rising in a context where future prospects seemed dire rather than tainted with hope, emerged punk. "Bands were the [1960's] counter-culture's greatest artistic contribution"³³, challenging popular music stereotypes, transforming rock and roll into a standalone art form. "Rock lyrics became the main way that the new ideas were spread".³⁴ 60's counter-culture was at its core utopian, optimistic and idealistic. Punk emerged in stark contrast then, as it rejected the

³² *Ibid.*:98

³³ *Ibid.*:111

³⁴ *Ibid.*

bleak future its youth was presented with. Yet still central to it, as evidenced by the provocative sonorous performances of the Sex Pistols, was the idea “music was the main vehicle for the dissemination of counter-cultural ideas”.³⁵ The connection to politics was playful in 1960’s counterculture; punk was at its core a downright rejection of the political Establishment.

The relationship between punk and contemporary culture is one which continues to be explored. Music journalist and cultural critic Greil Marcus has developed it at length in *Lipstick Traces*, in which, starting from the event of the Sex Pistols’ last concert, he places rock within a broader social, political and cultural framework. Marcus identifies the fact that “various kinds of angry, absolute demands – demands on society, art, and all the

³⁵ *Ibid.*:116

governing structures of everyday life – seem to be coded in phrases, images, and actions passed on invisibly, but inevitably, by people quite unaware of each other”.³⁶ Marcus points to the idea of a unity of voices heard throughout vociferous counter-cultural movements, which echo one another, seemingly unrelated.

The Dialectical Essence of Punk

The insight Marcus has resonates with an understanding of punk which goes beyond a context-specific counter-cultural movement. Punk is itself reflective of an attitude of defiance, rising up against what the prevalent norms and ideas of society are. Such an attitude is, in essence, an application of the dialectical phenomena Hegel makes explicit, in a counter-cultural context. The

³⁶ Monro, 2016:42

dialectical movement is one which reveals the tension inherent in a premise. More precisely, it is this tension which reveals itself, making explicit what is latent. Indeed, Hegel claims to be observing the self-movement of ideas, driven forth by self-consciousness. The “pearl of energy”³⁷ that is punk is in essence a manifestation of the way in which society moves forward in its self-expression, and the way in which an idea, such as the established culture, reaches its limits. Counter-cultural movements follow an indwelling tendency to themselves become antiquated as rebellion, and in turn elicit a response to their own limits. This is evidenced by punk’s short lifespan, and by how little of its art exudes timelessness. Yet, what is common across counter-cultural movements and evident in punk, is the rejection of the Establishment, the expression of its inadequacies

³⁷ Edwards, 2016:38

and the refusal to abide by it: a powerful sentiment which resonates strongly. Punk as a counter-cultural movement embodies the tensions and limits themselves contained in the ideas which are prevalent in the mainstream society. This is essentially what Hegel identified as the dialectical stage of his logical doctrine.

Punk and Counter-Culture: Moving Forward

Hegel is the “philosopher of Geist and inventor of philosophical art history”³⁸, setting forth the idea of the work of art as not only a mirror, but the “matrix of the culture’s self-understanding as a coherent form of life”.³⁹ As man and the human world change with and because of the culture they belong to⁴⁰, the worldview expressed in art is

³⁸ Rutter, 2010:2

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Inwood, 1993:xxii

appropriate and properly understood in its own time alone. The Homeric worldview for instance was the “truth of its age”, and a necessary stage in a development of a stronger truth.⁴¹ Hegel is a seminal figure of German Idealism, which cannot be detached from the Romantic era it was a part of. He saw his own era as one of artistic decline, in which art could no longer satisfy the higher aims of humanity. In the *Philosophy of History*, Hegel states that the vitality and inventiveness of a civilisation is signalled by the flourishing of its fine arts.⁴² But this disenchantment with his own time seems to suggest his historical idealisation comes from a place of “Mal du Siècle”. Man’s essential sensuousness is the main objection to debates around the “death” of art. More plausible is the reading that “history has exhausted all the possibilities we can presently

⁴¹ Inwood, 1993:xxiii

⁴² Kaminsky, 1962:171

conceive”⁴³, signifying that for Hegel, the role of art was diminished in his own time, and is no longer adequate to present the “supreme need of the spirit”.⁴⁴ All he can advance is that in his time history and philosophy have reached a peak, whilst art has declined.⁴⁵ But such a reading is best understood in light of the Romantic “Mal du Siècle”, whereby artists and philosophers see their own century as one of decline, idealising those of the past, and projecting a future which can be no more than idealised theoretical fiction, which Hegel appears to have been unable to avoid.

Not everyone was, or indeed is, a punk. Even though counter-cultural movements occupy an important role in collective imagination, they represent a reactionary faction of the population,

⁴³ Inwood, 1993:xxxii

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

despite informing the current status quo. In any tense social landscape, “some unrepentant punk attitude might be just what we need to stir everything up again and remind us of our rights, encouraging social discourse and sending a much-needed counter-shock through the system.”⁴⁶ Punk as an attitude hence epitomises the Dialectic, the negation and rejection of entrenched discourse and of the Establishment. It seems somewhat ironic then, that punk as a cultural movement of the 1970’s, has in the manner it is remembered, lost the tenacious and visceral energy that characterised it. It has itself become part of the Establishment, its 40th anniversary has been celebrated by the very institutions it once abhorred. “The original punks, famous for pissing on the rule book, would certainly loathe the very idea of celebrating its fortieth

⁴⁶ Cullen, 2016:30

anniversary”.⁴⁷ Joe Corre certainly showed this, by publicly declaring he would burn his personal collection of punk memorabilia, worth an estimated £5m. “Like most subcultures and movements that initially survived on the margins of society and took pride in so doing, punk has been inexorably adapted, adopted and accepted by mainstream culture”.⁴⁸

Patricia Cullen points to the resonances punk ideology has with the “fractious contemporary political landscape”.⁴⁹ The mid-1970’s were characterised by political conflict, collective disorder, joblessness fuelling a general turmoil which “incites lethargy and boredom as much as protest”⁵⁰. Informed by a strong desire for autonomy and self-expression, punk reverberated

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Monro, 2016:42

⁴⁹ Cullen, 2016:29

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

onto the wider artistic scene. “From its inception, punk was as much a fashion (or anti-fashion) statement as it was a music genre demanding independence from the older generation and expressing anger and frustration with individuals and institutions in power.”⁵¹ Moving forward, expecting a new emanation of what has already been observed, we can hope to see a new artistic and creative scene emerge as an outlet to respond to current trends of political disenfranchisement and discontent. This thought is an optimistic one; if such an analogy holds true, such emerging counter-cultural trends will in time gain more mainstream support, and themselves become antiquated and be surpassed. And further along the road, this new scene may be a source of a golden age of longing.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

Looking outward then, the Hegelian dialectics observable in punk give a hope of a constant rejuvenation of cultural participation. Looking at this process gives the certainty and reassurance that through art, as an expression of a worldview, criticism of the mainstream will surface, and will be expressed with vociferous energy. “Whenever there is political upheaval, revolt and change, new art surfaces that reflects the times”.⁵² Hegel’s aesthetics and dialectics appear to be validated and observed in counter-cultural movements which at first glance seem far removed from the realm of 19th century German Idealism.

⁵² Monro, 2016:41

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