

Magnificent Failures Collide

And assure your selves, if you pitch not right now upon the right point of freedom in action, as your Covenant hath it in words, you will wrap up your children in greater slavery than ever you were in... (Winstanly, 2011, p. 61)

Introduction

This essay revisits a time when both Punk and Situationism flourished in the UK. When a whole generation of radically different artists emerged as outsiders, amateurs, and the lower classes found cultural empowerment as an agent for social change. Their varied practices critiqued the societies they lived in, questioning the authority and authenticity of established politics, language, history, music, and film. In his book, *Anyone Can Do It: Empowerment, Tradition and the Punk Underground*, Pete Dale says the phrase 'anyone can do it' was 'commonly voiced in the mid-to-late 1970s but widely adhered to within the punk underground in the decades since' (Dale, 2012, p. 2). This simple philosophy reached a mass of individuals and groups who no longer accepted the given order of the day. They found solidarity and established tools to claim cultural territory, creativity, and social context on their terms.

It takes us back to the origins of the King Mob's violent beginning as part of the Gordon Riots in 1780. King Mob's influence saw a re-emergence of similarly motivated riots in the late 20th century, linking with the British faction of Situationists in the 60s and 70s and the influence of Situationism on Malcolm McLaren and Punk. It also looks at the significance of King Mob's appearance in the UK Uncut protests in the 21st century, up against the UK Conservative government's austerity measures in response to the international economic crisis. Furthermore, this essay includes research on the rise of independent record companies in the UK, such as Factory Records and other DIY record labels and distributors. They favoured a grassroots ethic, encouraging bands to self-publish and self-distribute.

I am lucky to have experienced Punk, post-Punk, and the rise of the World Wide Web, which Tim Berners Lee invented in 1989. I have lived through the transition between an analogue

and a digitally networked world, as well as pirate radio that existed before the World Wide Web. Art and activism have defined my relationship with people and the world and how to exist within it. This essay touches on a subject close to my heart. However, I am also aware that certain myths and ideas regarding Punk and Situationism's history are not what they seem and have been told differently for different reasons. These diverse voices are all important to me, and I continue to find it fascinating to hear and read other peoples' recollections and how these radical experiences changed their lives. My reason for revisiting these histories is to see what can be learnt from this seemingly chaotic period. What elements and values used by those involved in these grassroots movements can help us now?

Radical Friendships: Apart but Connected

I have chosen to focus on this aspect of British history that looks at art, Punk, activism, and Situationism, and the arts organisation [Furtherfield](#). Founded by Ruth Catlow and myself in 1996, Furtherfield has survived by exploring subjects that relate to everyday people whilst being dedicated to technological experimentation. In 2021, it has a community online using various platforms, a gallery and a community space, in Finsbury Park, in the park, London. Furtherfield has drawn inspiration from numerous individuals and groups in history, ranging from theorists, revolutionaries, activists, hacktivists, artists, and artistic groups. These include Punk, early post-punk movements, and the Occupy Movement against economic inequality and social injustice.

Contemporary art and activist groups who share similar ambitions and values are [The Cube Cinema](#), Bristol, the [NeMe Arts Centre](#), a non-profit organisation based in Limassol, Cyprus, [Aksioma – Institute for Contemporary Art](#), a non-profit cultural institution based in Ljubljana, Slovenia, since 2004. Then you have Access Space in Sheffield, which formed in 2000 with its core values in free, open-source software, hardware, and peer two peer learning and knowledge sharing, and Backspace in London, UK, founded in 1996 by James Stevens, one of the earliest media labs in the UK until 1999.

We have found inspiration from many individuals and groups in history, including theorists, revolutionaries, hacktivists, artists, and critically engaged art groups. We have also found reassurance with the recent emergence of the international protests with the Occupy movement. They are the latest example of a mass of people collectively and directly commenting on society's conditions by neoliberal structures with its marketing and military defaults, thus advocating a common for everyday people, as we at Furtherfield also do. More recently, we have also found inspiration in Black Lives Matter (BLM) and solidarity with others fighting against the same top-down hierarchies dominating our lives.

BLM, Occupy, and other grassroots groups reflect arguments about societal contexts synonymous with those of Furtherfield. We share a sense of comradeship as part of a multitude left abandoned by the elites. In their book *Commonwealth*, the Critical Marxist theorists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri discuss how the term multitude reflects the condition of not owning property or characterised by poverty. They also discussed how the foundations of multitude and poverty were established in seventeenth-century England's political struggles, 'The multitude is

not only about humans, but also about being inseparable from interdependent ecologies that exist in perpetual relations. It is about co-existing rather than being isolated.’ (Negri & Hardt, 2009)

Another ingredient shared by Furtherfield and the above examples is a critique of individualism and nationalism. The idea of the common and the multitude allow a non-national means of relating to others. Thus, I, from an arts organisation in the UK, can relate to someone in Mexico: not necessarily about art or technology but through shared values and concerns regarding climate change, privatisation and Neoliberalism, and how these big issues affect us, families and communities in each of our regions and worldwide. It is an evolutionary history deserving deeper inspection. In an interview with John Jordan and Gavin Grindon on *Furtherfield* in 2011, Jordan comments on the publication, *A Users Guide to (Demanding) the Impossible*:

Build a gang, a group, a collective, a crew – remember the joy of plotting things together, the power and possibilities when work and imagination are shared. Imagination finds its insurrectionary potential when we share it, when it's freed from the privatised ego, escapes from shackles of copyright and the prisons of the art world. (Jordan, et al., 2011)

Jordan's words reflect the same excitement you feel when building something with other outsiders that challenges society's accepted norm. Jonathan Israel, in his book *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, proposes that this approach is part of a tradition of *Radical Enlightenment*, a 'primary role in grounding the egalitarian and democratic core values of the modern world' (Israel, 2011, p. 6). He sums up *Radical Enlightenment* as a set of basic principles: democracy; racial and sexual equality; individual liberty of lifestyle; full freedom of thought, expression, and the press, eradicating religious authority from legislative process and education; full separation of church and state. Israel holds the 17th century Dutch Philosopher Baruch Spinoza as a major figure for *Radical Enlightenment*. Spinoza determined that 'society would become more resistant to being manipulated by religious authority, autocracy, powerful oligarchies and dictatorship, and more democratic, libertarian and egalitarian' (2011, p. 14). Hardt and Negri also found an affinity with Spinoza. Andy Merrifield perceives the theorists' inclusion of Spinoza as a positive shift away from negation and towards affirmation. Merrifield appreciates that political theorists must point out the pitfalls in society, yet he feels that it is also necessary to offer ways out of the same conditions being critiqued. He says, 'On one side there is cool analysis, precise strategy, negativity and distance, familiar Marxist materialism of the actual: from the other side comes a warm stream of Marxism, a hotter, more daring redness, a shimmering heat on the horizon.' (Merrifield, 2011,

p. 116). Merrifield favours the latter and coins this approach as 'Militant Optimism': a new philosophy of 'comprehended hope' (2011), in which there is room for a more positive understanding and appreciation of grassroots culture.

Failure and Cultural Emancipation

To create a magnificent failure is to create the best kind of picture: a picture that really drives and changes things. [...] If you have perfection, there is nowhere to go. With perfection, there is no communication. You have nothing to access. The disasters are what bring life and allow us to connect. That's the magic. (McLaren, et al., 2010)

We begin in the 1970s, a time in the United Kingdom during a decade of deep economic crisis. Inflation was unprecedented, and the country received international loans of up to 5000-million dollars to avoid economic collapse. If it were not for North Sea Oil, the UK would have fallen into a state of total collapse. Since then, the Scottish Nationalist Party (SNP) has argued that Scotland's oil was not owned by England (McCrone, 1975). In 1975 the UK's inflation rate peaked at 26%, strikes spread across the land, rubbish was left to pile up in the streets, and the dead were left unburied. Soon Margaret Thatcher, who was to become the UK's first female Prime Minister in 1979, would establish her conservative politics brand to dominate the British Isles.

While the UK's economy faltered, a new type of creative disquiet was emerging. A ragged and untidy new movement forged its voice within the crumbling infrastructures of a wavering political administration. A dynamic alternative culture swiftly emerged out of the wreckage. With its new form of lucid authenticity, Punk's arrival declared an awkward expression of disquiet and distrust of authority and the (given) past. The disaffected working-classes joined forces with the educated middle classes in a loose collaboration to reshape their contexts.

The term 'punk' did not suddenly arrive out of nowhere. It was already widely used as a descriptor of music to certain 'garage' bands of the 1960s such as The Standells, The Sonics and The Seeds' (Dale, 2012, p. 32). The Punk of the 70s and early-80s came afterwards, connecting to the disquiet with fresh energy against the establishment. It was explosive and, even though it was successfully upsetting the status quo, this was just the tip of a much larger surge of cultural activism that demanded not only a voice but more control. Anarchism was being taken seriously.

As these radical and imaginative creative activities became more widespread and, as Helen Reddington said, 'inspirational beyond their central core', it did not take long for what was considered an 'authentic political resistance to the commercialisation of the [Punk] music genre' (2016, p. 95) to emerge. At the age of 15, in 1978, I remember buying *The Feeding of the 5000*,

the first album by the anarcho-punk band Crass. Their music was wild and urgent; it was as if the truth was pouring its blood and guts into the vinyl. In the same year, Crass also produced a poster saying, 'Germany got Baader-Meinhof, England got punk, but they can't kill it.'

In an interview with Steve Ignorant, Matthew Worley says,

Standing stage front, howling at the moon, was Steve Ignorant. Crass's lyrics came from multiple sources; Crass songs had multiple voices. But Steve Ignorant shouldered much of the burden. Where Penny Rimbaud exuded a cutting intellect, Steve embodied Punk's instinctive rebellion; a guttural 'fuck you' that he captured in 'Do They Owe Us a Living', a freeform rant cut from Arthur Seaton's cloth. (2016, p. 296)

Reddington reminds us of how a forgotten generation that found its voice in Punk also included a forgotten gender. Women, who ended up at the tail end of a post-60s society struggle, reasserted 'their diverse agendas within the open format of punk' (2016, p. 95). Reddington adds, 'we too felt anger, and we too wanted to express this alongside our contemporaries' (2016, p. 95). In her essay *The Woman Punk made Me*, Lucy O'Brien discusses how, for her, the 60s and early 70s counterculture movement opened up pathways for punk feminism:

Germaine Greer firmly put the politics of female sexuality on the agenda when she guest-edited the special 'Cuntpower' issue of the underground magazine *Oz*. Included in the issue was a women's liberation manifesto, a piece on female masturbation, instructions on how to make your own 'Cuntpower' bikinis, and a Greer polemic on the power of 'cunt' confrontation. No longer were women to remain 'chaste guardians of their husbands' honour'. In a characteristic clarion call, she wrote: 'Cunt is knowledge ... Skirts must be lifted, knickers...must come off forever. It is time to dig CUNT and women must dig it first.' (O'Brien, 1999, p. 187)

Feminism was often integrated into the ethos of the anarcho-punk movement as part of the general force for change expressed through lyrics that 'explored themes of pacifism, vegetarianism, Revolution, and acceptance of queerness' (Reddington, 2016, p. 102). The band Poison Girls communicated their social and political contexts by sharing an angst-ridden sense of solidarity. As Reddington mentions, they were 'particularly influential on feminist discourse and practice in anarcho-punk bands, partly because they were active from a relatively early date (1977) and toured with Crass from 1979 onwards an audience alongside them' (2016, p. 102). However, this was unusual at the time. The main lead singer/guitarist, Vi Subversa, was a middle-aged mother. She wrote the bulk of the songs, which explored sexuality and gender roles from an

anarchist perspective.

Punk Vs the Monarchy: Owning the 'NOW'

The only thing they owned was the 'NOW' for there was no future, as Johnny Rotten in the Sex Pistols' screamed in the song *God Save the Queen*, released on the 7 June 1977, the same day as Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee. Originally called *No Future*, Rotten changed the song's title as an attack against the British monarchy, appropriating its national anthem title.

The Sex Pistols played the song on a boat on the River Thames, outside of Westminster Palace. By now, The Sex Pistols member Malcolm McLaren had become well known for his promotion. *God Save the Queen* was banned, and playing their music off the Thames' land was a way to bypass the law. This intervention took place as crowds lined up in a procession at St Paul's Cathedral to respect the Queen. Inside the cathedral, the Royal Family were greeted by world leaders from all over the globe, including England's then Labour Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan. All around the country, millions of citizens held local street parties with their families, friends and neighbours as a shared national celebration.

As an intervention, *God Save the Queen* was an event and a song. It officially reached number two in the charts below Rod Stewart's brilliantly, if not inadvertently, ironically named song, *I Don't Want to Talk About It*. Many still believe that it sold more copies than Stewart's single and suspect it was not allowed to be at the charts' top. The mainstream press and media immediately challenged the monarchy's rejection, and this controversy became the record's selling point.

When the established media, television and radio, produced bland content and many, especially the younger generation, desired more active control of the content being transmitted. They wanted to hear and see representations in the media that reflected their social contexts and values – subjects relating to their situations. British journalist and TV presenter Janet Street-Porter knew this, 'as she brilliantly explored subjects and cultural trends, the mainstream decidedly ignored' (Gallagher, 2011). On 22 November 1976, as part of *The London Weekend Show*, Street-Porter presented the first TV documentary on The Sex Pistols, The Clash and Punk Rock. Around the same time veteran, DJ John Peel chose to play Punk on his BBC radio show.

John Peel always prided himself on maintaining an anti-establishment attitude and on his ability to back the underdog. He was anti-establishment because he knew how the

establishment worked – he'd been part of it, and he didn't like it. (2005)

Despite the blanket ban on all official radio stations and other media platforms, Peel kept playing The Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks* album, in full, during and after the Queen's Silver Jubilee. The cultural tectonic plates were shifting, and Punk was pulling apart a tired music genre, as well as the nation's trapped psyche. It was opening a new field for music and politics. The 70s was a violent time to grow up in, especially if you lived on council estates or squats. The Slits' associate Don Letts' described 70s Britain as the dark ages for women, a 'judgement which is brought home hard in Albertine's recollections of her teens and twenties' (Jones, 2014).

The Slits, alongside the then wider and growing punk scene,

criticised the music industry for “manufacturing” groups and sold music “like tins of baked beans”; punk groups sang of being on the dole not wanting to work in factories. It is clear, then, that Punk, too, was critical of modern, industrial capitalism (Dale, 2012, p. 32).

Their music pushed boundaries and,

their gleeful cacophony merged into something more avant-garde and musically complex as they learned from reggae and free jazz and mixed nursery rhymes and bits of conversation into what became their own sound (2012, p. 32).

The Slits would serve as an inspiration to future rockers, including Kurt Cobain and Carrie Brownstein. They also inspired the Riot Grrrl movement in the 90s, including the Seattle-based grunge band 7 Year Bitch and their tracks that condemned the sexual assault, such as *Dead Men Don't Rape* (1992).

Some said the Sex Pistols were conforming to the same capitalist desires as those they supposedly were challenging in the first place. Greil Marcus says they 'used rock n' roll as a weapon against itself' (2001, p. 54), Richard Barbrook views it as a political detournement, saying that within a year of the '100 Club gigs, almost every city and town in Britain had its own alternative punk scene which operated outside the constraints of the corporate entertainment industry' (2012, p. 61). This new grassroots network deeply reflected upon the cultural consciousness with a critical voice. Alongside the monarchy and the government, traditional rock

music echoed its form of complacency – as did the ruling establishment. In August 1976, whilst he was drunk, Eric Clapton publicly declared his own 'support for Enoch Powell (the racist Tory minister famous for his 'rivers of blood' campaign against immigration) at a gig in Birmingham' (Huddle, 2012, p. 209). Clapton's statement came only eight-years after Powell's in 1968. It was even more offensive and hypocritical because he had begun his own solo career by recording Bob Marley's song's hugely successful cover version, *I Shot the Sherriff*.

The post-industrial and post-boom years from the 60s had not only brought about the rise of Punk. The tough social and economic conditions also opened up a new kind of racism, such as the National Front (NF). The political establishment and mainstream media failed to effectively address these issues, adding to an increased ambiguity around racism. Numerous street skirmishes took place between the NF and the Anti-Nazi protest groups, resulting in regular racist attacks and killings. One well-known killing was the death of Akthar Ali Baig in East Ham in London in 1979. He was murdered by a skinhead gang which 'led to a march of 5,000, the downing of tools by black workers at Ford's and the shutting of local shops' (German & Rees, 2012, pp. 248-249). On top of this, the police compounded the problem by issuing their institutionalised implementation of racism. A common complaint by anti-racist protestors at the time was that they were usually arrested instead of the racists advocating violence at the NF rallies.

Punk opened up new possibilities to challenge the rise of racism in the UK, working alongside the Black and Asian communities. Roger Huddle, a co-founder of RAR (Rock Against Racism), said that by collaborating with the ANL (Anti-Nazi League) they were, 'able to build a mass movement against the Nazis' (2012, p. 209). The punks initiated a whole new movement in April 1978, in contrast to the police and government slackness, Labour or Conservative, in dealing with racism on the streets. The ANL organised a march from Trafalgar Square to the 100,000-strong Rock Against Racism carnival in Victoria Park, where The Clash topped the bill. It marked a turning point in the area as thousands of local people, of all races, 'turned out to show their opposition to fascism' (German & Rees, 2012, pp. 248-249).

Punk and Situationism both critiqued the hierarchical infrastructures dominating everyday life, which meant drawing upon ideas expressed by other activists and theorists. Guy Debord, the founding member of Situationist International, always thought the working classes needed their intelligentsia. However, even punk, post-punk and the Situationists could not successfully fulfil this need. Perhaps framing it in Debord's terms is a step too far for us in the UK regarding how Brexit, Trump, Oligarchdom and Neoliberalism have dominated the country's narrative right-wing

media outlets. Yet, in music today, critical voices are challenging the status quo: the black feminist punk band Big Joanie, Stick In The Wheel who, as a band with working-class origins, puts forward perspectives on traditions, roots and culture; Sleaford Mods, Billy No Mates; black working-class rap singer poets such as Akala; and 'working-class writers such as Kerry Hudson, Lisa McKenzie, Akala, Cash Carraway, and Darren McGarvey being heard by larger and larger audiences' (Hunter & Oduor, 2020).

What Cultured People Want

It didn't matter that the Sex Pistols were the most conspicuously inept band in Britain – a rabble of foul-mouthed, working-class kids playing stolen instruments in deserted clubs. McLaren saw that the times were rich with promise for them. (Langley, 2010)

Maclaren's *Magnificent Failure* asks us to reposition ourselves as individuals, as well as collectively, locally and culturally. By resisting the expected behaviour of chasing other people's top-down oriented ideals of what is deemed perfect, or an ideology loaded with classical conceptions of what is the best art, we, as imaginative individuals and collectives, can grapple with our conceptions of empowerment in terms that are graspable and less distant. In claiming, accepting and owning that our dysfunctions are part of our resource, and by understanding who we are and where to go from here, we are no longer submissive to empirical and systemic notions of perfection.

What cultured people want, in terms of language (and thought), is to be well-defined, correctly positioned in strictly combined terms, and this is what they call good speech, good thought, and good writing. But they do not realise that they are thereby creating a closed circuit that leaves no room for anything but what was there in the first place---except for the decomposition inherent to all closed circuits, like moss that grows in a hermetically sealed jar. (Dubuffet, 1989)

Situationism's revolutionary ideas and activist ploys were appropriated into UK's mainstream culture by Malcolm McLaren, Jamie Reid and Vivienne Westwood, who mutated it into their take on the Punk genre. They tapped into a dystopian feeling of disenfranchisement to feed a hungry vacuum in which a mass of youth felt lost. There was also disappointment in the art world, with its establishment holding everyone back. Across the board, something needed to be done. Something needed to blast through the bourgeois-hold over society's collective imagination.

McLaren's involvement with the English contingency of Pro-situs' a loose group of individuals calling themselves King Mob, was a strong influence on the punk movement's creative design and street-wise marketing. McLaren and Jamie Reid appropriated the aesthetics used by the Situationists and King Mob. This anti-establishment cut-and-paste process also influenced a whole generation of fanzines, such as *Sniffin' Glue*, produced by Mark Perry in 1976. Perry used everyday tools immediately available from any local store. You didn't have to spend money on designers

and expensive printing costs. Anyone could create a Punk Zine and *Sniffin' Glue*, with its accessible and no-nonsense do-it-yourself ethos, was an essential part of what Punk culture stood for. A grassroots consciousness quickly spread across the land with a flood of other punk zines incorporating similar cut-and-paste graphics, typewritten or felt-tip text, misspellings and crossings out. Photocopying also contributed to the punk zine look. It limited graphic experimentation to black and white tones and imagery based on collage, enlargement and reduction. Simultaneously, in the UK, filmmaker Derek Jarman was also grappling with the societal contexts and ideas of what Punk was bringing to culture. In his film *Jubilee*, the baron says:

You wanna know my story, babe, it's easy. This is the generation of who forgot how to lead their lives. They were so busy watching my endless movie. It's power, Babe. Power. I don't create it, I own it. I sucked and sucked and sucked. The Media became their only reality, and I owned the world of flickering shadows – BBC, TUC, ATV, ABC, ITV, CIA, CBA, NFT, MGM, C of E. You name it – I bought them all and rearranged the alphabet. (Acrylic, 2013)

Jubilee is one of those films that has so much in it. Whenever I watch it, I always see something new. It doesn't just remind me about Punk then, but it also reminds me of who I am today. One of the strongest images in the film, for me, is the Slits smashing up a car together in a wasteland. It was an unusual thing to see, and it felt unsettling. Yet, I could appreciate the therapy in demolishing an object with others: a symbol of shared empowerment and the destruction of shared frustration and pain.

The film originated in Jarman's friendship with Jordan, the frontwoman for Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's most outrageous designs for Sex and then Seditonaries – and a punk icon. *Jubilee* included several punk groups in this state-of-the-nation address – Adam and the Ants, the Slits, Wayne County – marking the start of a fertile relationship with the music industry. (Acrylic, 2013)

At the time of its release, many thought *Jubilee* was a disaster. Looking back, I realise that its psychological and existential nihilism, and its profound deconstruction of England's idea of its history and dreams, reflected a nation's fears and nightmares about itself.

In *Quietus* magazine Adam Scovell, when writing about the film on its 40th-anniversary in 2018, said that it showed Jarmen's relationship and experience with London just as much as his own anxious and dysfunctional idea of what Englishness was to him. The irony of the settings isn't lost with Scovell either. *Jubilee* was filmed on the 'empty streets and landscapes of Deptford, Bermondsey and Rotherhithe with St. Saviour's Dock, just around the corner from Jarman's space' (Scovell, 2018). Now, these very same spaces have been developed into expensive properties where 'a one-bedroom flat in the same wharf today is now [worth] over £500,000' (Scovell, 2018).

The Rise of Riots and King Mob

England's historical struggle is not just about its ruling elites: its Kings and Queens and its heads of governments. We need to know more about the struggles of those trying to make a difference in society in their own and collective ways. I am sure that when Punk sprawled its unhinged disquietedness and expressing its disappointment and anger across the land, those who ruled were deeply concerned. They feared uprisings from within the grassroots movement, in which groups of individuals threatened their validity. Of course, riots did spread across the land but not as part of Punk's calling. They were part of a larger unplanned set of public demonstrations in 1981:

The 1970s and 1980s saw several of these actions, in the form of riots against the state's repressive institutions (Notting Hill Carnival, Bristol, Brixton, the July 1981 riots), as well as wildcat strikes (Mansfield Hosiery Mills, Imperial Typewriters, Grunwick). (Smith, 2010)

The phrase 'mob rule' is Latin for *mobile vulgus*, meaning 'the fickle crowd'. However, it is important to think of the context that the phrase is used within, having been coined in the eighteenth century to describe the labouring poor' (German & Rees, 2012, p. 9). The term 'mob rule' was originally coined in the 2nd century BC by the Greek historian Polybius. In his book *The Century of Revolution*, Christopher Hill proposes the word 'mob' was first used in the UK in 1688. Hill described a period of upheaval when wages were low, and people lived in terrible living conditions while property owners were rich and controlling the government (2001, p. 295).

In the 1760s and 1770s, protesters took to the streets to support the mobocratic politician John Wilkes. Ironically, Wilkes himself coined the dismissive term 'mobocracy' to describe France's revolutionary government. He campaigned for wider parliamentary representation and the liberty of bourgeois Englishmen, including the press's freedom. Every move in his campaign was accompanied by displays of support on the London streets, which included bouts of window-smashing in the city and indiscriminate attacks on the houses of wealthy Londoners – some of whom were supporters of Wilkes.

In 2008, Hari Kunzru wrote an article on King Mob's historical subject, commenting on an archive of subversive print materials acquired by Tate Britain, consisting of anti-art collages by the King Mob collective. In his article *The mob who shouldn't be here King Mob*, Kunzru writes,

King Mob never wanted to find themselves here, in the house rag of cultural consumption, let alone locked away in Tate's permanent collection. But these posters and magazines are just detritus, the record of past struggles. In the present day, the real action is elsewhere. (Kunzru, 2008)

Kunzru's statement regarding King Mob only existing in the past is not correct. The collective exists at various protests even today. Armin Medosch expressed that he had noticed signs of their activities as part of student demonstrations against the rise of tuition fees on 9 December 2010 (2010). King Mob's origins are of significant relevance, both historically and contextually. The name was taken from graffiti daubed on the outside walls of Newgate Prison, which read, His Majesty King Mob. The graffiti referenced the Gordon Riots in June 1780.

Three different events coincided in history and created conditions of uncertainty for the Gordon Riots to happen. Initially, the riots were in reaction to The Papists Act 1778, an Act of the Parliament of Great Britain that saw the Act for Catholic Relief enacted by the Irish Parliament, all under King George III's reign. The British were losing the American War of Independence, and urgently needed more troops. Scottish fighters were enlisted and, with most of them being Catholics, this saw a partial relaxing of the 1699-1700 William III anti-Catholic act. Also, the Catholic Relief Bill only applied to Catholics taking an Oath of Allegiance to the crown.

The first riots consisted of Protestants protesting the Catholics they felt were being favoured above themselves. Afterwards, many new rioters exploited the opportunity to protest about various issues concerning poverty in Britain, such as falling wages, unemployment, rising prices and civil non-representation. Votes in the parliamentary elections were limited to a privileged elite, and these votes were only accepted under terms of a property threshold. This isolated most Londoners who had hoped for a more respectful understanding of their social contexts. Wanting reforms that were not just based around class and status, they viewed most parliamentary-based decisions as unrepresentative of everyday people's real needs.

Property belonging to Catholics was burnt down, but only rich Catholics, not ordinary citizens. In fact, the riots can be viewed as an aborted "English Revolution" shortly before the French managed a rather better job of theirs. In London, courts were torched, and prisons were opened (most of the prisoners freed were being held for non-payment of debts) before being burned. Painted on the wall of Newgate prison was the proclamation by inmates rioters were the words "His Majesty, King Mob". The riot was eventually put down by the army, which killed about

300 in doing so. Another 30 (or 60) people were executed later for their part in it. (Liscard, n.d.)

Whose Riot Is It Anyway?

In 1970, a small band of English activists formed the world's first and only, Situationist terrorist group: the Angry Brigade. Seen as the British Baader Meinhof of the radical and extreme left, they caused fear at the British establishment with a series of bomb attacks. 'Over the next two years, their feats of revolutionary daring would repeatedly grab the lead item on the TV news bulletins and the front-page headlines [...]' (Barbrook, 2012, p. 79). Bright adds, 'no one was killed, but after a clampdown on the "counter-culture" and amid accusations of a Bomb Squad "fix", four radicals were sentenced to 10 years in prison (2002). Even though a terrorist group active in Italy simultaneously with a similar name, The Red Brigade, added confusion, as Sadie Plant says, 'the Angry Brigade's greatest strength lay in the elusive air they cultivated' (1992, p. 128). The Angry Brigade's dedication towards the 'autonomous working class' meant 'the efficiency of its attacks ensured it a serious reception' (Plant, 1992, p. 128).

An editorial in the Evening Standard spoke of the 'red badge of Revolution creeping across Britain' and declared: 'These guerrillas are the violent activists of a revolution comprising workers, students, teachers, trade unionists, homosexuals, unemployed and women striving for liberation. They are all angry.' (Plant, 1992)

Even though blowing up 'the homes of smug Tory ministers and bullying Ford factory managers cheered up disgruntled workers who were forced to consume the tendentious monologue of the media spectacle' (Barbrook, 2012, p. 79), something else needed to happen. Something that could carry the same angst but into a wider movement. Something that loosened the tight grip of spectacular capitalism. It was also known that Debord was not an advocate of terrorism.

In 1967 Timothy Clark, Christopher Gray and Donald Nicholson-Smith were excluded from the Situationist International. Various stories are bandied on the different accounts of the reason for these exclusions. Guy Debord was in the habit of expelling the Situationist International members as he was not an advocate of terrorism. He followed Andre Breton's dogmatic process of keeping the group as pure as possible, and there were never more than ten main members at a time.

In an interview with Kristin Ross, Henri Lefebvre discusses his experience and relationship with Debord:

I was careful, since I knew Guy Debord's character and his manner, and the way he had of imitating Andre Breton, by expelling everyone in order to get at a pure and hard little core. In the end, the members of the Situationist International were Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and Michele Bernstein. (Ross & Lefebvre, 1997)

Building emancipation is difficult when all belief systems, infrastructures and institutions, and their defaults, have been designed by the men. As Frances Stracey wrote in her essential publication *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International*, within the group 'everybody – male, female or otherwise – was subjected to the alienating conditions of the society of the spectacle' (2014, p. 97). In *Expect Anything Fear Anything*, Dutch artist and graphic designer Jacqueline de Jong, who joined the Situationist International in 1960 and co-published *The Situationist Times* from May 1962-67, says, '[...] I will probably shock you if I say they were macho men' (2012, p. 187). She adds, 'There were few women artists, for the simple reason that women got married and had children. The circumstances for a combination of being a full-time artist and wife/mother were tough!' (de Jong, 2012). Surviving as a woman artist in the 60s was not easy.

Simone de Beauvoir famously said in her ground-breaking book *The Second Sex*: 'All oppression creates a state of war. This particular case is no exception. [...] Two transcendences confront each other; instead of mutually recognising each other, each freedom wants to dominate the other.' (1949, p. 849) The trap of the oppressed, oppressing each other, is a classic dysfunction. This binary battle between the sexes is tediously endless. In respect of sexism in Situationist International culture, even though Debord was controlling everything, Stracey writes, 'Bernstein and de Jong had considerable influence and effectiveness within the SI, despite the overwhelming dominance of certain male members, notably Debord.' (2014, p. 115).

Stracey also discusses how,

[...] when faced with questions about the impoverished role of women in the SI, both Bernstein and de Jong do not appeal to feminism but to a revolutionary identity that is not grasped by Sex, sexuality or gender. Directing a revolutionary spirit of SI's politics and mode of the revolutionary organisation with a critique on all forms of separation or division between workers and non-workers, young and old, blacks and whites, men and women. (Stracey, 2014)

There are many different accounts for Situationism and the histories of marginalised projects such as Black Mask, Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers and the Scandinavian Situationists. They have been left out of Debord's definition of valid forms of Situationism. Each new generation draws upon past Situationism to bringing their social contexts into a contemporary light. However, different interpretations and critiques arrive out of some of these cultural and social appropriations. For example, in 2007, as art-activist collaborators and peers, Kate Rich, Ruth Catlow and I watched *La Société du Spectacle (Society of the Spectacle)* by Guy Debord – a black-and-white film made in 1973, which we had seen before. When we were twenty minutes in, Rich suddenly paused the film and said, “I cannot stand this anymore, it's a man with a miserable and grumpy voice, talking over soft-porn shots of women, as he tries to seduce viewers with his arguments”. Even though the core messages were vital, a realisation occurred that this misogyny lessened the film's criticalness.

King Mob Echo

After being kicked out of Situationist International in 1967, Timothy Clark, Christopher Gray and Donald Nicholson-Smith continued to publish their England-based Situationist-influenced magazine the following year. They called it the *King Mob Echo*, after Christopher Hibbert's book *King Mob; the Story of Lord George Gordon and the Riots of 1780* (1959), which linked King Mob and the riots' revelations as a pivotal moment in British history. Yet, even though they published three editions between 1968 and 1969, the magazine did not come without criticism from Debord who, in *The Latest Exclusions*, published in *SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL* in 1969, said 'Gray now publishes a rag called King Mob which passes, quite wrongly, for being slightly pro-situationist' (Debord, 1969).

Gray and his collaborators found a strong connection with Hibbert's historical documentation of King Mob and the 1780 riots. After all, the French Situationists had had their national revolution in 1968, which was well documented and still accepted as part of today's French identity. Not just that, it was only the year before that Gray et al. were expelled by Debord and the accepted core of Situationist International. It was also a decade after Hibbert's book's publication and ten years since the Notting Hill race riots against West Indian immigrants in 1958¹. *King Mob Echo* was also published the same year as the student riots in May 1968, Paris. As a cover line for *King Mob Echo*, they used a quote originally written by Karl Marx that read 'I am nothing but I must be everything' (O'Malley, 1970).

Hibbert provided a solid grounding to the Situationist-led desires of Gray and others for the *King Mob Echo* magazine. His book not only connected them to the (then) current troubles, rumblings and rising social upheavals in Paris, but it also served as an inspiring reference to the French Revolution in 1789–1799.

In contrast with the majority of the New Left, the activists of this magazine had realised that – when the local population wasn't directly employed in manufacturing – community activism and cultural subversion were now the most effective forms of collective resistance. (Barbrook, 2012)

¹ The Notting Hill riots of 1958 have been catalogued on the University of Warwick library website: <https://warwick.ac.uk/services/library/mrc/studying/docs/racism/riots>

The first issue, published in April 1968, features a front cover image of a menacing masked man (from Louis Feuillade's film *Fantomas*). It included a translation of *Desolation Row* by core Situationist International member Raoul Vaneigem. The second issue, published in November 1968, was a four-page supplement titled *King Mob: Two Letters on Student Power*. Gray wrote the main text for the issue and different texts about the end of modern art. The third issue, published in May 1969, features King Mob's extensive critique of the hippie/dropout counter-cultural movement happening in England and America and praises their New York counterparts *Black Mask/Motherfuckers*, for their guerrilla tactics. Gray *The revolution of modern art and the modern art of revolution* circulated in typescript before being published in Tom Vague's publication, *King Mob Echo: English Section of the Situationist International* (2000). Other voices were part of the 60s King Mob, such as David Wise, who, along with his brother Stuart, still engage in class struggle and social revolution through *Revolt Against Plenty's* website: <http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com>.

We Wise Up and Rise Up! Punk Claims Situationism

It is worth noting how influential the writer Norman O Brown's contributions are, not only because of his first article in the *King Mob Echo* publication. He also successfully formulates an argument explaining the psychology around ideologies, politics and desire in culture:

Culture may be viewed as a symbolic medium that allows desire and fantasies to become externalised and articulated as a social reality. Culture represents a screen for the projection of mental contents. Symbolic objects in society constitute objectifications, containers for our fantasies, permitting us to "perceive" them. Therefore, according to Brown, culture "does for all mankind what the transference was supposed to do for the individual." (Koenigsberg, 2005)

Brown puts forward the concept that fantasies are externalised and shape our world. Or, as Slavoj Zizek puts it, 'the fundamental level of ideology is that of an (unconscious) fantasy structuring our social reality' (1989, p. 27). Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion; rather, it is a fantasy-construction that supports our reality itself. Finding the tools to make this possible reality is all part of building an alternative living situation. For example, in the late-70s, the tools at hand were the news-hungry national media, a disgruntled youth, and appropriated Situationist tactics. The atmosphere was ripe for creating a radical noise to play the Spectacle at its own game. Established and culturally valued icons worked as worthy objects to project activist disquiet on to. The figureheads that stood above all in England and the Commonwealth were also vulnerable targets to McLaren's cultural, interventionist plans.

Disquiet and lack of belief in society were already visibly to us. The contrast of extreme wealth taking no responsibility or providing active support for the troubles presented those affected with distant contempt. However, Malcolm McLaren from the Sex Pistols was not offering any practical solutions to the social ills dominating everyday lives. Instead, he exploited Situationism ideas and the current political problems just as much as he exploited anything else at hand, and he got the Sex Pistols onto the mainstream stage at whatever cost. McLaren saw the Spectacle in society and pushed Debordian principles from *The Society of the Spectacle* to their fullest extent.

The role of the Sex Pistols in the punk movement has been completely mystified. They may have stolen the show, but even so, Punk would have happened without them – while they wouldn't have achieved fame without Punk. What was important about Punk was the Do It Yourself attitude, not the few stars who "swindled" their way to the top. (Home, 1991)

McLaren and The Sex Pistols became figureheads and the royalty of the Punk movement. Yet, the then-unknown rapidly expanding anti-establishment culture thrived on its own terms. Placing McLaren, lead singer of the Sex Pistols John Lydon or even founding member of the Situationist International, Guy Debord, as the main protagonists for the punk movement is in danger of creating celebrity above others deserving equal representation. Sadie Plant recognised Punk provided a much-needed shot in the arm for the anarchist movement, with Class War's Stop the City and Bash the Rich campaigns 'providing some light entertainment and heavy policing during the 1980s and squats, the travellers, and a hundred and one imaginative and provocative phenomena developing out of the punk milieu' (Plant, 1992, p. 147). To topple governments was not the plan, yet disrupting and playing the system at its own game was. The shared narrative was to inspire others to reclaim, manipulate and restructure social realities at their will. After all, if everything you have been told is a lie, why not create your own reality?

Conclusion

The Punk and Situationists' creative disruption(s) are historical examples of how and why people connected through their cultural practices beyond the restrictions of a dominating hegemony. These grounded and complex expressions drew on historical ties and political interests and shared influences and relationships with contemporary art and culture. We looked at the origins of *King Mob*, from the Gordon Riots in London 1780, through to the small radical British Situationist movement loosely formed in the late 60s and early 70s, the English Section of the Situationist International, and Punk in the mid to late 70s as well as Post-Punk in the early 80s. It then takes us to King Mob's re-emergence as part of the student demonstrations against the rise of tuition fees on 9 December 2010. These actions came from grassroots situations that questioned authority and established politics, including language, history, music and film, using the conviction that 'Anyone Can Do It'. When Punk was first seen on television, we revisited its impact. We saw the emergence of other anarcho-punk groups and how they created the conditions to open up new forms of anti-violence and feminism alongside anti-racism and breaking down class barriers.

When looking back, the meaning changes and our reasons for why we look at it, whether it includes ourselves or others, change. I see a wild spirit where creativity was anarchic, pluralistic, and unruly while challenging top-down and imposed complacencies. It's time to reconsider these energetic and feral entities that grew out of the common dirt and reclaim our places as radical protagonists of change. Not just this, we need open kick the doors wide open for a whole new generation of imaginative activists to claim their place and space in the world, to expand their radical contexts beyond history into a living and ever adaptive story for anyone to enjoy.

What should we take away from these past moments now gone? So much energy and intensity spent on social change. So much of what is seen as either failures or accomplishments are swiftly blown asunder by hegemony. Yet, just like love in the family of a close one gone, we can feel a deep resonance about a culture that is not just about teenage rebellion but reflects a yearning for real emancipation. It's not about succeeding or reaching desired goals; it's about us being alive and magnificent failures, changing the handed-down narratives to fit our own.

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