1. Title

'You'll never beat the system by bombing Number 10' Perceptions of the utility of political violence in anarcho-punk, 1977-1987

Rich Cross

No Sir, I Won't: Reconsidering the legacy of Crass and anarcho-punk, Oxford Brookes, 28 June 2013

---

2. Contention

[As slide]

> *Anarcho-punk should not be seen simply as a pacifist-punk culture. The culture's self-identification as 'peace punk' was not immediate, and anarcho-punk quickly became diverse in political and cultural ambition, especially concerning the nature of opposition to the state*
>
> *Perceptions of the utility of political violence changed within a few short years, as anarcho-punk responded to a range of pressures and counter-pressures. Changing views of violence reflect shifts in the centre of political gravity within the movement*

3. 'Boring fucking politics will get us all shot'

Discussion about the recourse to political violence in Britain often starts from the assumption that the use of physical force in pursuit of political aims is somehow 'alien' to the British system. To provide the context for a discussion about anarcho-punk's relationship to political violence means establishing the extent to which political violence (deployed by the state and its opponents) was a recurring feature of British political life in the late 1970s and 1980s.

4. Airey Neave

Airey Neave, a senior conservative politician and notable establishment figure, was blow up and killed by the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) as he left the House of Commons car park in March 1979.

5. Warrenpoint and Mountbatten

In August 1979, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) carried out its most devastating single attack against the British army, killing 18 paratroopers in a co-ordinated ambush at Warrenpoint. The same day, the PIRA blew up a boat carrying British royal family grandee and senior figure in the British establishment Lord Mountbatten.

6. Inner-city riots

In the spring of 1981, during the first term of the new Thatcher government, inner cities across Britain erupted in rioting, triggered by a series of interlocking grievances around unemployment, economic deprivation, police harassment, social exclusion and racism.

7. Falklands War

In 1982, the British state again went to war, this time in conflict with the Argentine state over control for the Falklands-Malvinas islands in the South Atlantic. British 'recovery' of the territory from the Argentine force which had 'reclaimed' it. The war cost almost a thousand lives.

8. The Great Miners' strike

Throughout the year-long miners' strike of 1984-85, there were repeated clashes at pit heads and coking plants across the coal fields and beyond, between striking miners, scabs, police (and army personnel in police uniform) as the Thatcher government battled 'the enemy within'.

9. Battle of the Beanfield

In June 1985, British counter-culture was again targeted by the state, as a convoy of travellers attempting to establish a festival at Stonehenge came under a concerted, planned assault by riot police, who broke up the convoy, smashed vehicles, attacked, beat and arrested members of the convoy.

10. Broadwater Farm riot

In October 1985, serious and widespread rioting engulfed the Broadwater Farm estate in north London, triggered by the death of local resident Cynthia Jarret following a police raid on her home. PC Keith Blakelock was killed by during the disturbances,

These snapshot moments – which in no way exhaust the litany of acts of political violence over those ten years – are intended to demonstrate only that the recourse to the use of physical force in pursuit of political ends reoccurred time and again during that period.

11. Punk and violence

So what were the perceptions of British punk, and specifically of anarcho-punk, towards the question of violence?

12. "England got punk..."

A well-known Crass poster, pasted up on the outside of The Roxy club in London in 1977 declared: "Germany got Baader-Meinhof, England got punk but they can't kill it". It was an interesting comparison and an illuminating choice. The clear inference and implication: that there were parallels between the activity of the German paramilitary group and the cultural-political challenge of punk, and that (unlike the vulnerability of the German activists to incarceration and death) that the idea of punk was unassailable; something which could not be wiped out. However, it suggested too that Baader-Meinhof was a potential alternate response to the state of things than that offered by punk.

13. 'A Baader-Meinhof situation'

In their early work, the 'Baader-Meinhof' situation remained a reference point (and a warning of how things might progress or degenerate).

14. Anarcho-punk's political ambition?

Key to understanding the perception of political violence in the work of anarcho-punk is the nature of the movement's political ambition. There was an interplay between the individual acts of personal liberation and collective acts of wider social resistance it sought to encourage. But there was uncertainty too about whether the ultimate goal was personal freedom or social revolution.

15. Anti-militarism is not pacifism

One important distinction which sometimes becomes lost in discussions about anarcho-punk (especially concerning its opposition to the war state) is between anti-militarism and pacifism. Although they are often conflated they are not the very different. In the late 1970s, the majority of the 'traditional' British anarchist movement was anti-militarist in orientation, but only a small minority of its activists were avowedly pacifist by principle.

16. Crass and Poison Girls

The joint catalysts of anarcho-punk, Crass and Poison Girls, did not have identical positions in relation to the counter-culture or the value of the anarchist movement, but their implicit and explicit political orientation (in 1977-1978) was closely aligned.

17. "Making nonviolent revolution?"

Although the publication was not referenced directly by either band, the perspectives of the contemporary *Peace News* pamphlet *Making Nonviolent Revolution* clearly echoed the positions of anarcho-punk: with its focus on the synergies of anarchism and pacifism; its belief in the power of counter-cultural networks; its assertion of the need to 'act differently' and contract new relationships and ways of being; and its conviction that insurrectionist confrontation with the state could be avoided by personal and collective acts of rebellion that would cumulatively undermine the authority of the state. The pamphlet provided a pithy and considered articulation of 'revolutionary pacifism' closely in tune with the implicit manifestos of anarcho-punk.

18. Why a 'pacifist' anarcho-punk?

There was though nothing *automatic* or *predefined* about anarcho-punk's assertion of *pacifist* revolutionary intent. There were, however, factors which strongly influenced the culture's identification with revolutionary pacifism.

19. *Feeding* and *Hex*

It is notable though that, although anarcho-punk came to be defined by its pacifist commitment, there are so few explicit assertions of pacifism in the early releases of either Crass or Poison Girls.

20. *General Bacardi* as exception

One notable exception can be found in the lyrics of the song *General Bacardi* (on Crass' *The Feeding of the 5000*), which condemns authoritarian (and violent) attempts at the seizure of state power for delivering only further misery and oppression *and* criticises the current within hippy which turned its back on the struggle against tyranny and fascism. Here anarcho-punk was asserting the need to reject both insurrectionist violence *and* abstention from the struggle against oppression.

21. *Bloody Revolutions / Persons Unknown*

It was the joint *Bloody Revolutions / Persons Unknown* single which codified and make explicit anarcho-punk unambiguous rejection of political violence – asserting baldly that 'freedom has no value if violence is the price'.

22. Systems 'mostly made of people'

The contention was forcefully reasserted in Crass' anthemic *Big A, Little A* – insistent that 'you'll never beat the system by bombing Number 10'.

23. A peace-punk culture

It was a pacifist perspective which became, over a 2-3 year period, predominant across the culture of anarcho-punk.

24. Flux

One illustration - the inner-sleeve of Flux of Pink Indians' *Strive to Survive Causing the Least Suffering Possible* contained the design of two young children arm-in-arm accompanied by the legend 'All the arms we need'.

25. Chumbawamba

Another illustration – the lyrics of Chumbawamba's song *Lies* end with the assertion of the need to confront the power of the war state with nonviolence and with love; declaring the need to show their opponents their hearts.

26. Peace under pressure

However, the efforts of anarcho-punk to mobilise its activists in acts of collective political protest put into sharp relief the challenges of 'peaceful confrontation' with the capitalist state.

27. Windscale tour?

At one stage, Crass made plans to organise a walking tour of sites of oppression and authority across the UK, intended to mobilise thousands of young punks in deliberately inflammatory acts of confrontation with the forces of law and order. But the likelihood of violence and concern at the likely repercussions led Crass to cancel.

28. Stop the City

The Stop the City demonstrations (1983-84) in the financial centre of the City of London provided anarcho-punk with another focus for collective anti-war and anti-capitalist protest. But over the course of the series of STC demonstrations, the protests became more militant and less bound by strictly pacifist precepts.

29. Poison Girls

That sense of the pacifist binds loosening was reflected some of the less guarded pronouncements of Poison Girls (now operating independently of Crass, following a period of close collaboration). The lyrics of *Rio Tinto Zinc* spoke to a sense of seething frustration

with the iniquities of political and economic power, and warned of the spectre of political violence.

30. Keeping the peace

Anarcho-punk did not exist in a political or cultural vacuum. There were contemporary pressures and counter-pressures which exerted influence upon anarchist punk culture, and which, in turn, anarcho-punk played a role in influencing and reshaping. Over the question of political violence, there were several key influencers which encouraged the movement to retain fidelity to pacifist principles.

31. 'Greenham'

The Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, with its feminist critique of male violence and embrace of peaceful protest exerted a strong shaping influence over the practice of the 'nonviolent direct action' wing of the peace and anti-militarist movement (where anarcho-punk activists were prominent). The *expectation* of nonviolence was a powerful conditioning factor on those demonstrating 'at the bases' and elsewhere against the machinations of the nuclear arms race.

32. Anarcho-punk scene and culture

There were several key elements of anarcho-punk's own culture which militated against a shift towards the acceptance or embrace of violence.

[As slide]

> *Not a homogenous culture, not all activists engaged at the forefront of confrontation with the state*
>
> *Matrix of influences, point of reference, self-selected political priorities*
>
> *Few mechanisms for agreeing reorientation of approach*
>
> *Anarcho-punk's pacifism remained ingrained in its counter-culture*
>
> *Acceptance of the utility of a recourse to violence was* divisive

33. 'Do what you want to do'

[As slide]

> *Advocacy of 'militancy' exposed rifts between the 'counter-culturists' and the 'insurrectionists', ripping-up the peace pact between them*
>
> *Crass, at least, felt an acute sense of responsibility about advocating actions that young activists might enthusiastically emulate*

34. Breaching the peace

But there were counter-pressures impacting on anarcho-punk, putting that majority commitment to pacifist principles and methods under increasing strain.

35. Counter counter-cultural voices

Within anarcho-punk, voices critical of the movement's espousal of pacifism had found expression. *Pigs for Slaughter* was a fanzine urging a more militant approach to the practice of punk activism; The Apostles were an anarchist-punk band opposed outright to the pre-eminence of nonviolence, here a sleeve displays an AK47 crossed with a spanner; a poster for The Living Legends gigs (with Crass) is headed with the slogan 'Bombs not Jobs' (in this case the aspiration is Molotov Cocktails). Such statements of intent were in sharp conflict with Crass' original pacifist pronouncements.

36. New anarchist agencies

[As slide]

> *Centre of political gravity in the 'mainstream' anarchist movement rebalances*

> *New agencies, including Class War, articulate a revanchist class-based anarchism, reaffirming the utility of 'class violence'*

> *Powerful dynamic between this shift and the new political uncertainties of anarcho-punk*

37. Animal liberation

[As slide]

> *Anarchist punks become key players in newly militant animal liberation movement*

> *Activists participate in clandestine raids on laboratories breeding farms*

> *Approach is increasingly confrontational, violent, and to some quasi-para-military*

> *'Nonviolence' seen as increasingly out of kilter with need*

38. Anti-fascism

[As slide]

> *Punks, including anarcho-punks, join street-level anti-fascist activity*

> *Active rejection of anarcho-punk's earlier perspective: 'left-wing, right-wing, you can stuff the lot'*

> *Nonviolence seen as cowardice and complicity*

39. 'No time to be nice'

[As slide]

> *Currents within anarcho-punk culture gripped by frustration and impatience*

Sense that nuclear conflagration was ever-more imminent – time had run out

Growing perception that the culture was falling short

40. Crass and *You're Already Dead*

Crass' final single *You're Already Dead* represents the zenith of the band's militancy. Although it clung to the notion of 'active pacifism', the lyrics, wraparound sleeve essay and the musical presentation all indicate that the band appeared to be teetering on the very edge of pacifist commitment.

41. 'I am not a worm'

Rimbaud wrote a handout for Crass' final tour in 1984, which questioned his own personal commitment to pacifism. It made the case that because the 'peace movement' was 'revolutionary' in nature it had to accept responsibility for potential future bloodshed; and raised the question of how (in some future insurrectionary situation) Rimbaud might resolve his own revulsion towards the use of violence with the imperatives of revolutionary action.

42. All the arms we need?

Two images, one of a broken gun (its barrel smashed by anarchist @) from *Station of the Crass* (1979); the other of a punk sneaking into action carrying a 'peace bomb', from *You're Already Dead* (1984), illustrate the political tension and the change in perception within Crass over a period of just five years. The image of the bomb-carrying punk is, to current day eyes, unremarkable; in 1984 it was not; and it was a representation of punk practice that simply could not have appeared on any earlier release by the band.

43. Crass and the endgame 'logic'

By the latter months of 1983, Crass were expressing in (collective, unattributed) interviews the seriousness of their future intent.

[As slide]

> *The band need "the space to hopefully sit down and think about what we should be doing, which might be arranging how Mrs Thatcher is wiped off the face of the fucking earth or something else. Possibly that's that direction we're gonna end up..."*

> *"What we've been saying for the last seven years to the society we live in is that unless you start taking what you're doing seriously, and understand what you're doing, there's gonna be a bloodbath."*

> *Crass,* MaximumRocknRoll*, October-November, 1983*

44. Brighton bomb

In 1984, the Provisional IRA came close to blowing up the British Prime Minister and a large number of the Cabinet when a bomb blew up the Grand Hotel in Brighton during the

Conservative party conference. Coming shortly after Crass announced that it was winding up operations, the timing of the attack coincidentally meant that that commentary on this pivotal event in the history of the Thatcher government was muted. Aside from a brief equivocal reference by Conflict on the sleeve of a 1985 single, there were few other comments.

45. This is the end

[As slide]

> *By 1987, anarcho-punk culture's first wave had retrenched*
>
> *Anarcho-punk was more disaggregated, less intimately associated with pacifism*
>
> *British anarchist culture – which had been reinvigorated by 'peace punks – was again increasingly defined by insurrectionist class-based politics*
>
> *Over a decade, anarcho-punk's relationship with the question of political violence became volatile, dynamic, contextual and contested*

The dominant perspectives within anarcho-punk were first codified along pacifist and nonviolent lines; but within a few years that commitment had come under acute strain, and pacifist belief was challenge by contemporary developments inside and beyond anarchist punk culture. What held anarcho-punk culture back from a wholesale rejection of pacifism were counter-pressures (also internal and external) which deflected a shift towards a more militant posture. By the latter years of the 1980s, such tensions within anarcho-punk had less relevance to the wider orientation of British anarchism as anarchist punk (and punk more generally) had become a less significant driver to the future development of the anarchist movement.

46. Contact

info@thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk
http://thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk