'The hippies now wear black'

Crass and the anarcho-punk movement, 1977-1984

Few social historians of Britain in the late 1970s would dismiss the influence that the emergent punk rock movement exerted in the fields of music, fashion and design, art and aesthetics. Most would accept too that the repercussions and reverberations of punk's challenge to suffocating norms against which it rebelled so vehemently continue to be felt in the present tense.[1] Behind the tabloid preoccupation with the Sex Pistols, a maelstrom of bands, including such acts as The Damned, The Buzzcocks, Slaughter and the Dogs, X-Ray Spex and The Raincoats, together redefined the experience of popular music and its relationship to the cultural mainstream. Bursting into the headlines as the unwelcome gatecrasher of the Silver Jubilee celebrations, punk inspired the misfits and malcontents of a new generation to reject the constraints of an exhausted post-war settlement, and to rail against boredom, alienation, wage-slavery, and social conformity.

Yet, in retrospect, the purity of punk's 'total rejection' of 'straight society' (if not seen as comprised from the outset) appears fleeting. By the tail-end of 1977, the integrity of punk's critique seemed to be fast unravelling. What had declared itself to be an uncompromising cultural and musical assault on an ossified status quo, was become increased ensnared in the compromises of 'incorporation' and 'commodification'. Punk bands which had earlier denounced the corporate big-time were signing lucrative deals with major record labels, keen to package and promote their rebellious messages. Specialist retailers, mimicing punk's innovate experiments with fashion and adornment, began to market new lines of standardised punk clothing. Punk rock's non-negotiable hostility to the marketplace and the mainstream appeared to be collapsing. It had, in the words of one cynical American observer been 'bought up, cleaned up, souped up' to become 'just another cheap product for the consumer's head.'[2] At the same time that punk appeared to be losing its way, a current emerged within the movement declaring itself committed to the prosecution of the punk ideal and determined to rediscover what it saw as punk's authentic and original intent.

The story of the birth of punk rock in Britain and the US is being rehearsed in every greater detail in the burgeoning historiography of this 'new wave' of music, fashion, art and culture — which, alongside individual biography, offers accounts of different subcultures within punk, and treatments of local scenes and time frames.[3] Yet despite the proliferation of such studies in recent years, the political history of punk is painfully underdeveloped. The history of what can be claimed as the most intensely radical expression of punk's politics and aesthetic – anarcho-punk – remains almost entirely unrecorded. In the flood of publications addressing different aspects of the punk phenomenon that have appeared in the last few years, it's striking how often the experience of anarcho-punk is absent.[4] Although a few short treatments of Crass have been published,[5] most of the

key debates currently animating both the academic and the popular literature on punk simply exclude anarcho-punk from their frame of reference.[6] This is an all the more glaring omission given the sophistication of anarcho-punk's own critique of punk practice, and the profound significance which Crass and other artists invested in the medium of punk.[7] In part, the exclusion of anarcho-punk from the majority of histories of the genre is a reflection of the reluctance of many authors to confront anarcho-punk's critique of 'conventional' punk's own practice. Yet it is also the unintended consequence of anarcho-punk's own fiercely independent sensibilities, which often resulted in its effective separation from punk rock's own 'orthodox' mainstream.

Centred around the work of the band Crass, anarcho-punk asserted a belief in the politics and practice of punk 'as it was always supposed to have been' – autonomous, subversive and free from commercial corruption. Embracing the politics of anarchism, anti-militarism and pacifism, Crass worked to popularise the notion of a consciously revolutionary punk rock culture. It was an approach that inspired many thousands to immerse themselves in the highly distinctive 'do-it-yourself' milieu of anarcho-punk and to commit their energies to what were recognised as the critical political struggles of the house. The results of this 'reclamation' of the punk imperative were often remarkable, but as the years passed it became clear that the movement was struggling to realise what it hoped was its true potential. Because it thrived with little organised, permanent structural form, anarcho-punk existed as an intriguing example of a movement defined by the contours of its subculture.

The emergence of anarcho-punk

In 1978, the release of the debut mini-album *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* by the band Crass announced the birth of a new current within the evolving British punk movement which came to be celebrated — and sometimes derided — as 'anarcho-punk'.[8] Musically, anarcho-punk certainly represented a further recalibration of the punk sound. After the Sex Pistols *Never Mind the Bollocks*, or the self-titled first album by The Ramones, only a handful of records comprehensively reinvented the notion of what punk rock album could sound like. In that, Crass's early releases could stand alongside those of Joy Division, The Ramones or Discharge. When *The Feeding of the 5000* was released it sounded like no other punk record before it had — the signature military drum-beat; the skittery power-buzz of the two guitars; the relentless lyric-chewing vocal; the shift without pause from one song to another; the lack of rock pretensions. More notable than the musical presentation, was its content – from the stunning, disturbing cover artwork, to the densely typed lyric sheet; to the uncompromising, compelling polemic with which the whole package bristled. It would be just these jarring juxtapositions between the content of the message and the medium of delivery that would give this new subculture so distinctive an edge, and infuse it with an infectious appeal that quickly attracted the interest of tens of thousands of young punks and

displaced radicals.

The anthemic track 'Punk Is Dead' encapsulated the tension at the heart of what Crass were about, and what anarcho-punk would become — a band and a movement that both embraced and celebrated and shunned and denounced punk:

> I see the velvet zippies in their bondage gear / The social elite with safety pins in their ear / I watch and understand that it don't mean a thing / The scorpions might attack, but the system stole the sting.[9]

As drummer Penny Rimbaud subsequently explained, this critique of punk was also intended as a rebuttal to what was perceived as the nihilistic declaration by Sex Pistols' frontman Johnny Rotten that there was to be 'no future'.[10] Even though the ever-resourceful Rotten has since rejected pessimistic readings of this lyric as shortsighted, Crass were claiming punk as a rallying cry to 'make history' rather than as the soundtrack for its end.[11]

Although a sizeable youth movement quickly burgeoned around them, Crass's position as the catalyst and engine for anarcho-punk was never seriously in question — however awkward Crass felt about their 'leading role'. Most of those involved with Crass were significantly older than the people who bought their records and turned out for their concerts. Unlike the majority of their contemporaries, Crass sought to highlight connections between the aspirations of 1960s counter-culture and the original impetus of 1970s punk. Importantly, Crass claimed punk as an extension and redefinition of elements brought forward from the culture of hippy. Several of the occupants of the Dial House commune from which Crass emerged had had long associations with hippy and other counter-cultural movements.[12] This notion of a rekindled hippy ethos sat problematically with punk's insistence on outright rejection of the political and musical forms of the past, but punk — drawing, as it had to do, on antecedents of all kinds — could not sustain the pretence that 1976 was some kind of 'year zero'. More problematic than hippy's pre-punk origins, was its content — and the difficulty of reconciling The Clash's declarations of 'hate and war', with Crass's insistence on 'love and peace'. Ultimately, such approaches *weren't* reconcilable, even though both claimed to be legitimate representations of punk. Even so, Crass's was never an uncritical reading of hippy, but rather a reclamation of what were seen as common principles — a rejection of crushing social conformity; of miserable wage-labour; of war and militarism; and a celebration of freedom, both collective and individual. It was also, as many of the band's critics appeared slow to acknowledge, a vision of hippy which offered its own bi-polar view – castigating the self-satisfied hedonism of sixties counter-culture, whilst romanticising its more consciously political elements. The band's assertion of a counter-cultural continuity linking hippy and punk immediately aroused the suspicion of some within the punk movement concerned to protect punk from the contagion of the failures of earlier generations. Disappointment with the decline and corrosion of hippy may help to explain the intensity of Crass's subsequent investment in punk. It had to work where hippy had failed. In their

farewell written statement, Crass insist that the anarcho-punk brand of punk rock had eventually become 'almost synonymous with punk'.[13] They may have wished that this had been so, but in fact things were more complex. In reality, anarcho-punk was in perpetual contest with 'mainstream' punk, its take on the punk project opposed, ignored and challenged by those who saw their own readings as equally (or indeed more) authentic.

Anarcho-punk reclaimed the notion of punk autonomy – rejecting all approaches from the pop industry, establishing in their place the movement's own record labels and distribution networks; working directly and collaboratively, without agents or intermediaries, to set up tours, produce publications and record music. Remarkably, none of the bands whose reputation gave them a national, and indeed international, profile broke this self-imposed embargo to "sell-out" to the majors. Crass themselves were approached by a would-be impresario, already responsible for a roster of mainstream acts, offering to "market" the band's revolutionary message through the established channels. His offer of a large advance and a lucrative deal was summarily dismissed. In 1984, the band were amused to reject a tentative expression of interest in their work from thinly-disguised representatives of the Soviet Embassy in London — but not before Crass's own delegation had sunk the supply of vodka on offer from the agents of the Russian 'literary magazine' who had invited them for talks.[14] All aspects of the group's work, from its appearance on stage, the packaging of its records. to the band's relationship to its 'fans' were subject to a political critique which, it is claimed, tried to subvert usual rock'n'roll conventions, to reclaim what were seen as the essentials of 'punk'. Messages of anarchy, peace and love were now delivered in anguished howls, over distorted guitar riffs and thundering drum beats, by bands who sought to honour the principles of 'do-it-yourself (DIY) punk' in every aspect of their work – records were stamped with the instruction to 'pay no more than' the breakeven price fixed by the band; concert tickets were sold for the barest minimum; all of the affectations and decadence of the rock-star lifestyle were shunned; and genuine efforts made to minimize the gap between performer and audience.

By 1984, the year in which Crass disbanded (a cut-off point set by the band in 1977), the anarcho-movement had reached the height of its powers, and was beginning to strain against its own political and sub-cultural limitations, and encroaching sense of fatigue.[15] Throughout the intervening years Crass remained the central focus and organising hub for anarcho-punk, at the centre of a burgeoning network of bands, labels, artists and publications which rallied around the anarcho-punk banner, and which, taken together, loosely defined this 'movement within a movement'.

A defining feature of anarcho-punk was the refusal to co-operate with the established music industry on all levels. To the consternation and incredulity of many music journalists Crass and other anarcho-bands declined to be interviewed and photographed for the pages of *Sounds*, the *NME* or *Melody Maker*. Instead anarcho-punk sought to stimulate its own outlets for its message, through the distinctive network of fanzines, and through handouts, mailings and publications under its own imprint, where control over content and presentation remained total, and unsullied or diminished by pop trivia around it. Crass's own position on the question was not absolute. When controversy

propelled the band into the limelight, members of the group would appear on television and radio shows, to put an anarchist case, but the band's own minimum criteria for participation usually made such appearances difficult to agree. Despite the efforts of many officials in the pop industry to exclude them (a fate earlier endured by the Sex Pistols) Crass's records regularly sold sufficient quantities to break into the Top Thirty of the BBC's chart. There was no prospect of the BBC's producers agreeing to appearances by the band (they had only to cite the band's 'unbroadcastable' lyrics and the court actions for 'obscenity' that were a recurrent and unwelcome byproduct of the band's published work), but Crass had their own impossible counter demand. Asked by *Tongue in Cheek* fanzine if there were any circumstances in which they would agree to appear on *Top of the Pops*, Crass replied: "That we could talk uninterrupted on any subject of our choice for the length of time that the record that got us there took to play."[16]

Such uncompromising statements of independence were, of course, criticised for being willfully counter-productive, by those arguing that the most effective acts of subversion were undertaken from within the industry – by those who heralded the Pistols and other as the 'poison in the machine' – and not by those denouncing it from the outside. As the movement mushroomed, Crass could counter that their own practice was drawing the attention of tens of thousands young people to anarchist ideas on an unprecedented scale, something that the movement's incorporation into the pop industry would immediately jeopardise. For Crass, the position remained self-evident:

> We believed that you could no more be a socialist [*band*] and signed to CBS (The Clash) than you could be an anarchist and signed to EMI.[17]

Crass also powerfully asserted that if the practice of anarcho-punk was to mean anything, then it was self-evident that it had to demonstrate the validity of its precursor politics. Anarcho-punk performers everywhere insisted that it would trivialise and diminish their revolutionary message to align themselves with those complicit in reducing punk to product – by this time typified the transformation of Adam and the Ants from a darkly sexualised art-punk ensemble into a sanitised pre-teen pop machine – and expose their DIY manifestos to ridicule.

And yet, inevitably, the integrity of anarcho-punk was sustained at no little cost. The movement's reliance on its own networks and outlets meant that to those engaged with it, the movement could appear vibrant and vital. But many outside of the immediate punk subculture were almost entirely unaware of its work. The movement's high principles made the negotiation of alliances difficult, but the very completeness of anarcho-punk's own defiant subcultural independence made it difficult for the movement to accurately assess its own political and cultural worth.

The politics of anarcho-punk

The politics espoused through the medium of anarcho-punk reflected a hectic and eclectic mix of aspirations – which drew as much on moral as on material considerations. There was no singular ideology in play, with – in Crass's case – inspiration being drawn from Ghandian principles, radical philosophy, the aesthetics of the Beat and Bohemian poets, and the words of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, as much as from the formal anarchist tradition. Crass probably overstate the case when they claim that in the bands' early days they 'probably would have thought' that Bakunin 'was a brand of vodka'[18], but the profound suspicion of ideologues and fixed ideologies remained. It afforded a politics largely free of debilitating baggage, but at the same time the anchor points that it provided were few and far between.

Initially replete with expletives and rich in harsh invective, Crass's own writing and pronouncements developed into what were often sophisticated, lucid and poetic writings. Alongside songs such as *Fight War, Not Wars* (in which the only lyrics were those of the title), came such detailed and intensely argued polemics as *Bumhooler*, *Rival Tribal Rebel Revel*, and *Bloody Revolutions*, and spoken word pieces such as *Demoncrats*, which concludes:

> Taken aside, they were pointed a way,
> For God, Queen and Country. Now in silence they lie.
>
> They ran before these masters, children of sorrow
> as slaves to that trilogy they had no future.
>
> They believed in democracy, freedom of speech,
> yet dead on the flesh piles I hear no breath,
> I hear no hope, no whisper of faith,
> from those that have died for some others' privilege.
>
> Out from your palaces, princes and queens,
> out from your churches, you clergy, you Christs,
> I'll neither live nor die for your dreams.
>
> I'll make no subscription to your paradise.[19]

Many other bands and performers within the anarcho-punk orbit chose a less poetic and literary timbre, grounding their work in the language and pre-occupation of the radical campaigns and issues

of the day. Crass's own reading of anarchism retained hippy's concern with the freedom of the individual from the intrusions of the state, but infused it with militant opposition to the 'war machine', and an excoriating critique of the alienated social relations of capitalism. In Crass's original lexicon, anarchism and pacifism were seen as synonymous and symbiotic. Around the calls for 'anarchy, peace and freedom', anarcho-punk's varied political impulses pushed the movement in diverse directions. Anti-militarism, and in particular, opposition to the nuclear arms race, remained definitional concerns throughout. But anti-war cries did not exhaust the anarcho-punk remit. The movement engaged — sometimes more successfully than others — with feminist, atheist, anti-capitalist and eco- politics. For bands such as Conflict and Flux of Pink Indians, the politics of animal rights, animal liberation, vegetarianism and veganism were central.

Crass's early work ensured that the politics of atheism took a prominent place in the movement's propaganda and artwork. After assembly line workers refused to press copies of the band's first record in protest at the sacrilegious content of the opening song *Reality Asylum*, Crass were obliged to replace the offending article with a silent track – which the band bitterly retitled 'The Sound of Free Speech'. Denunciations of the culpability of organised religion in the persistence of war and human suffering, and attacks on the church's position within the hierarchy of the "ruling elite" became recurrent themes of the wider movement.

Punk had provided numerous outlets for women performers and feminist messages, but anarcho-punk offered a platform for a distinctively anarcha-feminist politics. Poison Girls combined impassioned invectives against capital and militarism, with sophisticated critiques of the alienated nuclear family, and subtle explorations of gender relations. The women artists and performers within Crass had explored feminist themes since the band's formation, and in 1981 the band released the album *Penis Envy*, conceived as a specifically 'feminist attack', on which only the band's female vocalists appear.[20] The record's lyrical preoccupations were directed as much at the group's predominately male fan base as to the world beyond, driven by an awareness that many of the punks enthused by the driving and aggressive agit-punk that was seen as Crass's stock-in-trade often appeared to find the complexities of gender politics challenging, of secondary concern to the 'more pressing' conflict with the war state, or even an uncomfortable irrelevance.

The complications of Crass's own political position, and by extension that of anarcho-punk, were acute. Explored in the extended essays of Crass's 1982 book *A Series of Shock Slogans and Mindless Token Tantrums* the politics of anarcho-punk emerge as an interplay between nonviolence, counter-culturalism, spartan anti-consumerism and the exploration of personal liberty that might provide the supportive context for a relentless struggle against the forces of capital and the war state. Criticised by some anarchist opponents as a confusion of revolutionary perspectives with the 'politics of lifestyle',[21] anarcho-punk was premised on the adoption of radical practices in the personal lives of its adherents – co-operative and communal living, not-for-profit publishing and artistry, squatting, re-appropriation – that could together help generalise the culture of disobedience and direct action. Throughout, Crass's politics remained an unresolved fusion of the utopian and

absolutist, and the acutely personal and immediate.

Crass certainly attacked head-on the assertion that the legitimacy of punk itself rested on its working class origins, and condemned those whose sought to exclude participation in punk culture to those who measured up to the bogus criteria of 'street credibility' externally imposed by journalists and music industry pundits.[22] As a critique of the fetishisation of young white male working class street-culture – exemplified by the political schizophrenia of the early eighties Oi punk wave – and as an attempt to hold open the boundaries of the movement, the argument held great merit. Additionally, anarcho-punk was able to offer something almost entirely absent from the campaigns against rising unemployment of the time – a rudimentary critique of wage-labour itself. In the far less punitive welfare climate of the time, Crass suggested that the young unemployed should reject the passivity of their place in the 'reserve army of labour' and seize the opportunities that freedom from the factory and office afforded them. Celebrated in the band's riotous *Do They Owe Us a Living?*, this was a raucous and uncompromising defence of a new subversive 'giro-ethic'.

There were points, however, at which this rejection of alienated labour found expression in destructively hostile language – in which, for instance, the workers on the Ford production lines were seen as willingly complicit in their own subjugation.[23] And yet, those keen to dismiss anarcho-punk's 'déclassé' politics faced the difficulty that so much of the movement's energies were directed at encouraging collective action against multiple 'capitalist' targets, through language, imagery and song intimately concerned with exposing the social relations of power, ownership and wealth in Thatcher's Britain. By 1984, as many anarcho-punk benefits were concerned with raising money and support for striking miners as for anti-nuclear causes, and the peace movement's conflict with the nuclear state was itself seen as developing an increasingly revolutionary logic. Committed anarcho-punks ran with the hunt saboteurs, whilst denouncing the military and economic imperialism of the USA; they organized public fasts against world hunger, while they prepared clandestine spray-paint attacks on army recruitment offices. What kept the movement connected was the shared subculture of gigs, records and fanzines, not the diktats of any central organizing committee, or ultimately the pronouncements of Crass. Anarcho-punk's politics remained a moving target. For critics and supporters alike, even as the movement's manifestos evolved, they remained frustratingly imprecise.

It was a politics that left the movement noticeably separated from both the anti-militarist and anarchist traditions that it initially hoped to fuse. Crass's enthusiasm for some of the venerable institutions of the British pacifist tradition produced some interesting intersections and cultural clashes. Venerable organisations such as the Peace Pledge Union (or in other contexts, the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection or the National Council for Civil Liberties) found that their postbags were now bursting with envelopes scrawled with garish subversive slogans which revealed letters from young punks eager for the latest news on 'the struggle'. Somewhat taken aback by the attention, the PPU showed little enthusiasm for reflecting the iconography or vocabulary of anarcho-punk in any of its materials, prefering to rely on the organisation's time-honoured imagery and language, and sidestepping the punks' feverish appeals for 'anti-war action'. It revealed a mismatch

of expectations on both sides.

Of necessity, much of anarcho-punk's political identity was defined in oppositional terms. Crass's profound suspicion at the motivations of the Trotskyist left, ensconced within some of the key campaigning organisations of the day, was in large measure reciprocated by those left activists wary of Crass's anarchist credentials. Crass's association with the Rock Against Racism initiative, which many punk bands lent their name to, proved to be short lived, with Crass attacking what they claimed as disingenuous motives of RAR promoters, and the hard-left's hidden agendas.[24] More controversial still was the role of the Anti-Nazi League, and the street-level anti-fascist squads which at that time operated on its fringes. After such squad arrived uninvited at a Crass gig at London's Conway Hall and began setting about those in the audience with close-cropped or skinhead haircuts (on the assumption that this identified them as fascists), the band were incensed – going on to denounce in song the 'left-wing macho street-fighters willing to kick arse' who revealed their own 'bigotry and blindness' in the process.[25] It served to reinforce the band's anarchist insistence on the parallel between the power aspirations of the hard right and hard left.[26]

The culture of anarcho-punk

The defining visual aesthetic of anarcho-punk was the colour black. Crass maintained that the band had opted to clothe themselves almost entirely in black was a reaction against the 'peacock preoccupations' of the 'fashion punk industry' – to adopt a plain, uniform colour circumvented such 'irrelevances'.[27] When combined with other elements of the band's design and performance, it made them an imposing presence on stage. Many of those drawn to the music and philosophy of Crass soon adopted a similar dress code, refreshing their wardrobes from Army Surplus and charity shops, with cotton-drill and moleskin displacing Levis and leather. At gigs and demonstrations, anarcho-punks sought each other out, in an earlier manifestation of the kind of 'black bloc' seen in today's anti-globalisation protests. Although the similarity of appearance sometimes offered anonymity in the cut and thrust of a lively street march, police forces quickly recognised the hallmark of the new anarchist contingent, and responded accordingly. Critics mused on the apparent irony of 'uniform anarchists' urging the freedom of all from imposed rules (while Crass countered that this was both a trivial observation and a misrepresentation).

And yet the dress sense of anarcho-punks – however unmissable it remained – was actually one of the least significant aspects of the movement's culture. Far more important was the sub cultural expectation of co-operation and self-activity. However partial and halting it proved to be in practice, anarcho-punk was premised on the notion that the movement would sustain and extend its influence through the self-directed activities of its adherents – who would form more bands, produce ever greater numbers of publications, set-up record labels and radical co-operatives, and so generate

the cultural infrastructure through which the movement's influence could be multiplied. Although many of those who bought the records and turned out for the gigs ignored the exhortation, there remained a hopeful expectation that anarcho-punks would commit themselves to building the culture of the movement itself, and engage in political activity beyond it.

Some anarcho-punks certainly functioned largely as 'fans' of the genre, who bought the music, checked-out the gigs and — subject to sufficient pestering — bought the fanzines, but did little more than act in the role of consumer. Even so, the organisers, promoters, printers, composers, designers and authors of anarcho-punk tended to be thrown up from within the ranks of the movement. However inadequate the practice of anarcho-punk proved to be, it is still distinguished by the degree to which the movement was, in that sense, self-directing and self-sustaining.

The visual and graphic work of both Gee Suss and Mick Duffield was ground breaking. The disfigured Crass logo; the all-black-clad appearance; the style for stencil lettering – a sort of functional 'anti-type', and ideal for spray-painting, but – again – a brilliantly effective design motif, and all the other elements of Crass's graphic packaging offered a striking identity to rival Jamie Reid's work for the Sex Pistols. Gee's stunning artwork of collage and montage gave visceral and graphic reinforcement to Crass's musical messages. Duffield's and Gee's video presentations turned punk gigs into film shows and punctuated Crass's live performance. The work was stunning, and often appalling and horrifying – using juxtaposition and *decollage* of imagery to breathtaking effect.[28] For a band opposed outright to the commercial packaging and presentation of punk, Crass developed a visual identity that was distinctive and unmistakable. In retrospect, Vaucher's work in particular is increasingly recognised as 'having been seminal to the iconography of the "punk generation".'[29]

Records functioned as another tool in the agit armoury. Cover, defined by their stencil lettering and circular motif, were stripped to black and white, but reconceived as wraparound sleeves – opened up to provide multiple panels of information and artwork. Anarcho-punk gigs were also distinguishable from the mainstream commercial circuit in innumerable ways, tending to be organised in youth clubs, scout huts and church halls outside the usual rock circuit, and usually put together by amateur fan promoters. Larger gigs, involving artists such as Crass, Flux of Pink Indians, Conflict or Poison Girls, offered a wide variety of performers: poets with backing tapes, films, drum and vocal duos, alongside full bands. The presentation would be as comprehensive as possible, as halls would be decked with banners of anarchist and anarcho-punk emblems, TV sets and film screens. There would be no row of bow-tied bouncers on the door; no capitalist promoter in the background; certainly no merchandising stall or hot dog concession; and few incentives for 'ticket touts' to lurk outside. Entrance would be phenomenally cheap, and inevitably the evening would be a benefit for at least one cause if not several – although the discounted door price might generate fairly meagre receipts. Events got underway the minute the doors opened and were usually wound-up before last buses, tubes and trains so people could get home. These would also be, as they are characterised now, 'all ages show', without access restrictions.[30]

Despite, and partly because of these distinctions from the punk rock norm, anarcho-gigs were vulnerable to attack, and were sometimes marred by outbreaks of violence, usually fairly minor but at other times more serious.[31] In addition to the tensions inherent in anarcho-punk's 'confrontational pacifism', there are a number of other factors that explain this apparent anomaly. As has been mentioned, anarcho-punk's political critique extended to the dominant trotskyist politics of the hour, and explicitly condemned the highjacking of causes and the manipulation of 'front organisations' by the authoritarian left. At same time anarcho-punk was implacably hostile to the peripheral far-right and Nazi movements then trying to mobilise in Britain in the context of early Thatcherism. In consequence, anarcho punk gigs could be seen, by sections both the hard-left and the far-right, (as well as by thugs or no particular political affiliation), as 'soft targets':[32] the gigs would be found outside the usual club circuit; there would be few security staff able to intervene; and no enthusiasm amongst organizers for summoning the police. On top of that, would-be assailants surmised that the readily identifiable core audience at these gigs subscribed to a form of pacifist politics, which for some included a reluctance even to resort to physical self-defence. Many of the audience were people in their early teens, and — although bands would respond to any violent incidents and protect people as best as they could — in many respects the audiences were expected to fend for themselves in a culture that, for the most part, frowned on the use of violence. All of which meant that large-scale anarcho-punk gigs were usually characterized by a palpable atmosphere of exhilaration and anticipation — sometimes defiant and celebratory, at other times uncomfortably threatening.

Gigs were also a forum in which innumerable anarcho-punk 'fanzines' would circulate. 'Fanzines' had been a central part of punk culture since titles such as the seminal *Sniffin' Glue* began to document the emerging London punk scene in 1976.[33] As the literary and design equivalent of punk's musical exhortation to 'do-it-yourself', fanzines had become the defining 'xeroxed texts' of the original punk original wave. Self-produced and self-published, the cut-and-paste collage and stencil design ethos of the punk fanzine was enthusiastically taken up by such publications as Rock Against Racism's *Temporary Hoarding* and (to the evident disquiet of some Communist Party officials) the Young Communist League's *Challenge*. Yet what had effectively begun as a range of amateur publications by young punk music fans was transformed into something more specifically didactic through the experience of anarcho-punk. Often reconceived as 'zines' (to dispense with the associations of the 'fan' prefix) anarcho-punk generated a quite remarkable subterranean network of anarchist publications, which struggled against the design limitations imposed by the now-archaic 'duplicator' presses on which so many were produced to augment the movement's musical output. Direct, uncensored and strident, titles such as *Acts of Defiance*, *Kind Girls*, *No New Rituals*, *Children of the Revolution* and *Pigs Will Fly* used shocking imagery and crude juxtaposition, alongside poetry and song lyrics, to urge the intensification of the struggle against the nuclear state, animal cruelty, unemployment and police harassment. Individual print runs could run into several thousand copies, or be restricted to a few dozen. This entirely uncoordinated and uncatalogued outpouring of young people's radical political writing remained as ephemeral as it was passionate – the turnover of titles

proved relentless, and few imprints reached a double-figure issue number – and yet, for a brief while, it provided important confirmation of anarcho-punk's ability to inspire and engage.

Yet this sub-culturally distinct anarcho-punk milieu proved more adept at defining and defending its own independence than in forging effective alliances with other groups recognised as engaged in struggle with a shared set of enemies. Outside of the networks of venues, bands and fanzines, the organisational framework around which the movement might rally its forces remained rudimentary where it existed at all. Crass, reluctant to accept the burdens of political leadership which some in the movement wished them to take on, rarely issued calls for unified action of any sort. Enthusiasts for the spontaneous and the temporary, the band sought to redirect the energies of those keen to be recruited to new anarchist organisations – concerned that the once innovative culture of anarcho-punk risked becoming an impediment of its own.[34] At one point, Crass did set in motion plans for an ambitious mass 'walking tour' of some of the 'key institutions' of the nuclear state – beginning at the Windscale plant, and ending in Parliament Square – intended to demonstrate the movement's political clout. But as the momentum of the initiative grew, and with it the likely scale of the turnout of young, militant punks, Crass reconsidered. Concerned by the possible serious consequences of a series of set-piece confrontations between groups of anarchist punks and the forces of law-and-order, Crass cancelled the event, and weathered the resulting criticism. Although the organisational clarity of anarcho-punk never once matched its subcultural distinctiveness, it was still capable of asserting its influence in some of the prominent political and campaign movements of the day.

A list of Crass's own claims to political notoriety in this period would need to include the funding of the promising but short-lived Anarchy Centre in London (a follow-on for the band's support for the defendants in the Persons Unknown trial); high profile opposition to the Falklands War (which led to 'questions in the House' about the band's 'depraved and scurrilous' attack on her majesty's government in the guise of the 'How Does it Feel to be the Mother of a Thousand Dead?' single); and the 'Thatchergate' stunt (a gloriously subversive tape montage of an alleged telephone conversation between Thatcher and Reagan in which the leaders share war plans, which fooled both the FBI and KGB, as well as the British broadsheet press, for many months).[35] Yet behind anarcho-punk's own headline history, lay the countless actions and political initiatives, self-selected by the movement's own adherents, which blossomed uncollated and largely undocumented. The most striking example of the collective mobilization of anarcho-punks were the series of anti-capitalist Stop the City (STC) demonstrations in London's financial centre between 1983 and 1984 called to protest 'against war, exploitation and profit' and to 'celebrate life'.[36] Although not initiated solely from within anarcho-punk, Crass's own film documentary of the second STC confirms the extent to which these were primarily, though not exclusively, anarchist and punk affairs.[37] These part-carnivals, part push-and-shove fracas effectively illustrated both the capabilities of the movement and the limitations of its political coherence — demonstrating its disrespect for the routines of traditional law-abiding demonstrations; while at the same time highlighting the movement's

uncertainty over questions of strategy and agency.

In their own writing, Crass somewhat overstate the contribution that anarcho-punk made to resuscitating the moribund Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) in the early 1980s.[38] The initiation of a new arms race, confirmed by plans to deploy first-strike Cruise and Pershing nuclear missiles across Europe, revived anti-nuclear movements across the continent, and would have arisen with or without the intercession of anarcho-punk. What Crass and anarcho-punk can quite legitimately claim is to have convinced a substantial number of radical youth to commit their energies to the most militant anti-militarist wings of the disarmament movement, which laid siege to nuclear installations across the country and which saw no conflict between its pacifist precepts and its willingness to commit acts of 'criminal damage' on the military property of the nuclear state.

There can also be no question that Crass and anarcho-punk together also reinvigorated the ranks of the once-more marginalised British anarchist movement,[39] which had slid back into the fractious periphery after a brief resurgence in the early 1970s — although the 'old hands' and the 'new punks' never became fully reconciled to one another. Despite the misgivings of some longstanding activists, anarcho-punk both infused the movement with new blood, and refashioned its existing pre-occupations the better to reflect the primary concerns of the new militants.

Crass' political position shifted significantly, particularly in the latter years of the band's work (something which could only alter the centre of gravity in the movement as a whole). In the aftershock of the 1982 Falklands War, and Thatcher's re-election in 1983, the band began a process of political reassessment that saw the group's commitment to pacifism publicly corrode. The final material produced by the band also indicated the degree to which the 'corporate' position projected by the group since 1977 was beginning to unravel. Typified by the desperate remonstrations of the band's final single *You're Already Dead* the band were directly castigating the wider peace movement for its own 'appeasement' with the 'war state', and its hesitation at so critical a juncture — the imminent deployment of Cruise missiles. It was the most explicit call to action ever articulated by Crass, and the 'increasingly militant and increasingly covert' trajectory along which the movement was being pointed appeared to be darkening.[40]

The sense of impending catastrophe that came to define Crass's endgame had a number of unintended consequences. The sense of desperation at the inability to defuse the 'ticking time bomb' of nuclear conflagration halted the development of the movement's politics. Shifts in that politics, in part encouraged by the experience of the Miners' Strike, were held in check in the shadow of 'The Bomb'. Such reasoning helped to reinforce the sense of isolation, and indeed siege, preoccupying the movement, and encouraged the development of a distorted sense of its own significance — as if, on its own and unaided, it might yet 'save the world'. Conflict's 1986 album announced, without a hint of self-parody, that *The Ungovernable Force is Coming*. Yet the culture of anarcho-punk made the forging of political alliances outside of its own ranks immensely difficult. In that combination of urgency and dread, the anarcho-movement lost perspective and began to substitute itself for the popular uprising it so desperately wanted to see.

The ferocity and intensity of Crass's condemnation of war, the church, the state and 'the system' could prove intoxicatingly attractive to disgruntled and disaffected teenagers, who had already seen in punk rock a way to channel their own rebellious energies, and whose own political perspectives remained fluid. Some of the movement's critics suggested that – despite the informality of anarcho-punk's manifesto – many of its adherents absorbed its messages unreflectively, to become, in effect, 'Crass punks'. There was, they suggested, an unresolved tension between anarcho-punk's advocacy of individual creativity and the political uniformity by which the movement appeared to be defined. Whatever the validity of such a critique, it overlooked what might be seen as a more critical weakness in anarcho-punk's integrity – that many of those intrigued by its musical and cultural passions, did not take the movement's political ambitions as seriously, or as literally, as Crass and others around them had hoped. Some were attracted by the music, others by the graphic anti-war imagery, and still others by the sub-culture's seductive distinctiveness. Many punks turning out for anarcho-punk gigs did not make sharp distinctions between bands such as Crass and other 'commercial' punk acts of which they were also 'fans', and inevitably for many involvement proved to be transitory.

And yet, Crass's fidelity to the principles of independence and self-direction that the band (and the wider movement) took as self-evident, left the critics eager to decry the 'selling-out' of anarcho-punk disappointed. The music and culture of anarcho-punk exposed many tens of thousands of young people to a kaleidoscope of radical ideas and practices, which aimed to stimulate their sense of self-belief, uncluttered by the party-left's fixations with recruitment, bureaucracy and empire building. The fact that Crass, and anarcho-punk as a whole, attracted such intense critical reaction from others within punk should, in many respects, come as no surprise. Crass in particular provided an easy target. By most measures of 'street credibility' they ought not to have registered at all — many of the band were the wrong side of thirty; they were open hippy sympathisers; they lived in a commune in the country and grew their own vegetables; and, on top of that, they had the audacity to get stuck into the punk 'aristocracy'. Not only was their work an explicit critique of the 'for-profit' operation of many other punk outfits; their insistence that punk be recognised as subversive and propagandist infuriated (or left bemused) those who saw punk as the expression of things outrageous, escapist or plain stupid.[41] Punk itself, meanwhile, eluded simple categorization - proving itself capable of providing the soundtrack to a multiplicity of political projects, from the subtle and jazz-infused 'sex-pol' of the Au Pairs, through the gut socialism of Sham 69 and the UK Subs, the studied art-school Marxism of The Gang of Four, and the crude unpredictability of Oi.

Much of the significance and many of the peculiarities of anarcho-punk are revealed in the tensions — some of them 'creative', others of them more problematic — within the movement and its practice. For Crass themselves, such tensions were manifold. There was the sharp contrast between the sophistication, complexity and subtlety of much of the 'message' and the stripped-down, raw directness of the delivery. In every sense, it's not always clear that anarcho-punk's message is audible above the noise. Then there's the discord between Crass's irrefutable position as the movement's

figureheads and agenda-setters and the band's refusal of that leadership role and reluctance to assume responsibility for it. Crass's own determination to try out different forms of attack, to re-invent their own format and to strain at the creative limits of their project was not always matched in the work of the wider movement, where, in the work of lyric writers, fanzine editors and graffiti artists, evidence grew of a slide into formalism and routine, and where — through familiarity with the subject matters of war, animal suffering and the nuclear threat — the law of diminishing returns made itself felt. This was another illuminating conflict — exposing the contrast between the sophistication of anarcho-punk's analysis of punk and its betrayals, and the inability of the movement to acknowledge anarcho-punk's own limits, as well as celebrate its strengths.

If Crass and the movement they inspired sought to invest in punk a weight it could not bear, anarcho-punk remained an unanswerable riposte to the buffoonery, compromise and squandered principles which had corrupted so much of punk's original potential. To the tens of thousands of young people who found its intensity inspiring rather than repellant, anarcho-punk suggested that personal politics, counter-cultural work and 'revolutionary practice' might once again be the catalyst for a new mass movement for 'peace and freedom' — one which had ultimately eluded the 'rainbow warriors' of an earlier generation. If the ambition went largely unrealised, that was a fate which most other contemporary 'progressive' movements found themselves sharing. Crass, at least, saw the challenge as unchanged: 'It's our world stolen from us every day. We set out to demand it back. Last time they called us hippies. This time they call us punks.'[42]

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The original published version of this article can be cited as:

Cross, R., 2004. "The Hippies Now Wear Black: Crass and anarcho-punk, 1977-1984", *Socialist History*, 26, pp.25-44.

Rich Cross, "The Hippies Now Wear Black: Crass and anarcho-punk, 1977-1984", *Socialist History*, 26 (2004): 25.44.

The online pre-print version of this article can be cited as:

Cross, R., 2014. "The Hippies Now Wear Black: Crass and anarcho-punk, 1977-1984" [online], 11 May, The Hippies Now Wear Black, http://thehippiesnowwearblack.wordpress.com/?p=874 [Accessed on <date of access>].

Rich Cross, "The Hippies Now Wear Black: Crass and anarcho-punk, 1977-1984", The Hippies Now Wear Black, last modified 11 May 2014, http://thehippiesnowwearblack.wordpress.com/?p=874

Short link: http://wp.me/p2nkN-e6

Notes

[1] See, for instance, Gina Arnold, *Kiss This: Punk in the Present Tense* (London, 1997)

[2] Uncredited broadcast journalist, sampled on the Crass LP *Christ – the Album* (Crass, 1982).

[3] See, for example, Erica Echenberg and Mark P, *And God Created Punk* (London, 1996); Adrian Boot and Chris Salewicz, *Punk: The Illustrated History of a Music Revolution* (London, 1996); Mark Spitz and Brendan Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk* (New York, 2001); Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (New York, 2001); *Blank Generation Revisited: The Early Days of Punk Rock* (London, 1997); Dennis Morris, *Destroy* (London, 2002); Stephen Colegrave and Chris Sullivan , *Punk* (London, 2001); David Nolan, *I Swear I Was There* (Bury, 2001), and dozens of other titles.

[4] In Jon Savage's now 'classic' general history of British punk, for example, he acknowledges his inability to do justice to the phenomenon of Crass and anarchist punk, concluding that due to the complexity of Crass's work 'they deserve a book to themselves.' Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: The Sex Pistols and Punk Rock*, (London, 1991) p.584.

[5] These include: George McKay, 'Crass 621984 ANOK4U2', in McKay, *Senseless Acts of Beauty: Cultures of Resistance Since the Sixties*, (London, 1996) pp.73-101; 'Postmodernism and the Battle of the Beanfield: British Anarchist Music and Text of the 1970s and 1980s', in S Earnshaw (ed), *Postmodern Surroundings*, (Amsterdam, 1994) pp.147-166; Ritchie Unterberger, 'Crass', in *Unknown Legends of Rock'n'Roll*, (San Francisco, 1998) pp.259-

264.

[6] Essays in Roger Sabin (ed), *Punk Rock: So What?* (London, 1999), for instance, contain passing references to the work of Crass, but make no effort to integrate the experience of anarcho-punk into the analytical frameworks on offer.

[7] This may begin to change now that members of Crass have begun to publish their own autobiographical and retrospective work, notably: Penny Rimbaud, *Shibboleth: My Revolting Life*, (Edinburgh, 1998); and Gee Vaucher, *Crass Art and Other Pre Post-Modernist Monsters*, (Edinburgh, 1999).

[8] Crass, *The Feeding of the 5,000*, (Small Wonder, 1978).

[9] 'Punk is Dead', *The Feeding of the 5,000*.

[10] Sex Pistols, *God Save the Queen* (Virgin, 1977).

[11] Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*, pp.355-359; Julian Temple (director), *The Filth and the Fury* (UK, 2000); Penny Rimbaud, 'The Last of the Hippies', *A Series of Shock Slogans and Mindless Token Tantrums* (London, 1982) pp.62

[12] Penny Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*, pp.36-68.

[13] Crass, '…In Which Crass Voluntarily "Blown Their Own"', (insert with the retrospective Crass LP *Best Before 1984*, (Crass Records, 1984).)

[14] 'Still Ignorant, not so Crass', *Living Marxism*, February 1999; Penny Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*, pp.259; 'Preface', *Crass: Love Songs* (Hebden Bridge, 2004); p.xxviii; Crass, 'In Which'.

[15] Crass's own contemporary accounts of the development of the band and the anarcho-punk movement can be found in: Crass, *A Series of Shock Slogans and Mindless Tokens Tantrums*, (London, 1982); and, Crass, 'In Which'.

[16] *Tongue In Cheek*, No 2, n.d. but circa mid-1982.

[17] Rimbaud, 'Preface', *Love Songs*, p.xxiv.

[18] Crass, '…In Which Crass'.

[19] 'Demoncrats', *Stations of the Crass* (Crass Records, 1981).

[20] Crass, *Penis Envy* (Crass Records, 1981)

[21] See, for instance, the features on Crass and Poison Girls in *Anarchy*, No 34, n.d., but circa 1982.

[22] Music journalist Garry Bushell – a persistent and vocal critics of the band and of anarcho-punk – repeatedly attacked Crass for proposing such views, see, for example, 'The Mystic Revelation of Crasstafari', *Sounds*, 30 August 1980.

[23] The lyrics of Crass's 'End Result', from *The Feeding of the 5,000*, conclude: 'I hate the living dead and their work in the factories / They go like sheep to their production lines / They live on illusions, don't face the realties / All they live for is that big blue sign / It says… Ford.'

[24] See Crass, '…In Which Crass'; *A Series of Shock Slogans*.

[25] Crass, 'White Punks on Hope', *Stations of the Crass*, (Crass Records, 1979).

[26] See the discussion in, Paul du Noyer, 'At Crass Purposes', *New Musical Express*, 14 February 1981.

[27] See, for instance, Mike Holderness, 'Crass', *Peace News*, 18 May 1979; Rimbaud, 'Preface', *Love Songs*; 'Still Ignorant, not so Crass'.

[28] See Gee Vaucher, *Crass Art and Other Pre Post-Modernist Monsters*; and all Crass record sleeves and artwork.

[29] 'Artist profile: Gee Vaucher', 96 Gillespie Gallery, London: http://96gillespie.com/artists_profiles/vaucher.htm (accessed 20 April 2004).

[30] These latter aspects – 'all ages access' and public transport-friendly finish times are familiar enough features in today's music scenes, but they were significant breaks with the dominant rock'n'roll conventions of the day. For an evocative account of a 1981 Crass, Poison Girls, and Flux of Pink Indians gig at the 100 Club, London, see, Edwin Pouncey, 'Tea and Anarchy', *Sounds*, 20 June 1981.

[31] The fraught and atmosphere of a volatile and sporadically violent Crass gig (Perth, Scotland, 4 July 1981) is captured on the CD: Crass, *You'll Ruin it for Everyone* (Pomona Records) 1983.

[32] Rimbaud describes the attack on an early Conway Hall, London Crass audience by leftists seeking 'Nazi scum' in *Shibboleth*, p.119: "Anyone with hair shorter than half an inch… was regarded as fair game. The resultant carnage was ugly, unnecessary and utterly indefensible.'; and other attacks by right and left, p.127.

[33] See the collected *Sniffin' Glue*, (London, 2000).

[34] Rimbaud, 'Preface', *Love Songs*, p.xix.

[35] See, 'Crass Statement', *Freedom*, 27 November 1982; '…In Which Crass'; *Shibboleth*, p.250-254.

[36] Leaflets and posters advertising 'Stop the City' events, 1983-1984, in author's possession.

[37] Crass and Exitstencil Films, *Stop the City 29-03-84 (Rough Cut, August 1984*), 1984.

[38] Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p.584; Rimbaud, *Shibboleth*: 'our efforts on the road slowly bought CND back to life.'. p.109

[39] Savage, *England's Dreaming*, p.584.

[40] Penny Rimbaud, quoted in, Neil Perry and Hugh Fielder, 'Crass: A Militant Tendency?', *Sounds*, 25 October 1986.

[41] For an exploration of such views of punk, see Stewart Home, *Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory and Punk Rock*, (CodeX, Hove) 1995.

[42] Penny Rimbaud, 'The Last of the Hippies', *A Series of Shock Slogans*, p.63.