

Philosophizing post-punk

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Philosophers are talking more about music than they did in the past. This is partly to do with the rise of Adorno's star in the philosophical firmament and the fact that over half of his writings are devoted to music. But it is also because a generation that imbibed punk in its formative years is now in a position to choose the cultural objects of its intellectual scrutiny. So when a book appears called *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–1984*, it raises the temperature of intellectual debate.* This was the period when fascism loomed as an electoral reality in England, and the Left made anti-racism an inescapable feature of mainstream politics. Music was crucial to the process.

The material basis for music's cultural relevance is its industrial production and commercial distribution, initiated at the close of the nineteenth century and indelibly associated with the political upheavals of the 1960s. Mass production makes discussions of music turn ineluctably towards politics and social theory. Irony and sophistry flake off. To talk about a musical experience, you need to put yourself in the picture. Discussants wax autobiographical, they posit determinate social identities. Class issues – long hounded out of academia – become graphic and pressing. It was not for nothing that black America coined the tag 'soul music'. In a secularized, commercialized society, music *is* the locus of the soul; social being becomes unavoidable, specific and poignant.

In philosophy, things began with Nietzsche on Wagner (first for, then against) and were stoked by Adorno's polemics against classical harmony in favour of twelve-tone. Today debates turn around Noise, and the possible demise of music as system: as usual, the 'death' of something proclaims a new burst of life. Punk was the last time music and philosophy crossed paths in a memorable way, as pop was infected by a situationist critique of the social-democratic consensus. Guy Debord's admiration for the antisocial sullenness of the London proletariat suddenly became a cultural phenomenon in itself. However, punk was buried by those who came to praise it. Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming* told its story in the light of eventual commercial success, abolishing its sense of terminal crisis and reducing it to yet another rags-to-riches showbiz fable. Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* sidestepped punk's challenge to representation by ignoring its class politics – Dada, the situationists and punk were all glossed as terminal romanticism. For anyone who had seen the Sex Pistols, attended the F-Club in Leeds, or had fights with fascists at Rock Against Racism gigs – or simply walked down the street wearing clothes that were an invitation to get beaten up – these books were a drear disappointment. They hid punk's risk and violence behind a genteel screen, betraying its confrontational ethic with a liberal language of justification.

So it is hardly surprising that Simon Reynolds's *Rip It Up* has been flying off the shelves. With 126 fresh interviews with the protagonists, pictures researched by Jon

*Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–1984*, Faber, London, 2005. xxx + 577 pp., £16.99 pb., 0 571 21569 6.

Savage, and 550 dense pages written by a blogger 'too young' to have witnessed the Pistols, it promises to register what things felt like for the groundlings – those excluded from the scene-setting events in London, 'too late' but fully participating in punk as a mass phenomenon nonetheless. Those who cite 1976–77 as the 'real' moment of punk are those for whom it was a springboard to TV celebrity. Genuine punks – 'losers' from the spectacular point of view – actually lived punk between 1978 and 1984.

The morbidity of positivism

In telling the story of these years, Reynolds steps into a troubled zone, strafed with political and philosophical brickbats. A mild version of deconstruction – a kind of radicalism-with-compromise – is the name of his game. Green Gartside of Scritti Politti tells Reynolds that when he met Jacques Derrida, he 'told me what I was doing was part of the same project of undoing and unsettling that he's engaged in'. For Reynolds, society is a stable, reasonable entity 'unsettled' by a few dashing highwaymen like Gartside and Derrida. Unversed in Adorno, Reynolds is unaware that the crisis of Western metaphysics has social roots: society cannot get beyond its own hidebound concepts. Commentators on mass music ignore Adorno's analysis at their peril.

Adorno emphasized psychic liberation, mimesis, mad love and musical freedom. His focus on the musical object meant he could see through the ideological packaging that surrounds the consumption of music. Like the 'conspicuous' in consumption, it is not completely discarded, but it stops being the whole deal. Like a manufacturer testing a sample, Adorno honed in on music's appeal to the unconscious, revealing the sedimented historical content behind personal taste. For Pierre Bourdieu, such insights confirm the cynic's conviction that all culture is a prop for power. For Adorno, in contrast, cravings for musical freedom are glimpses of a new social order undistorted by domination. Despite his pessimism about formal politics, Adorno understood that capitalism is creating the preconditions for freedoms undreamt of in antiquity. Hence his depressive mania: a new world is possible, yet balked.

Writers committed to particular genres, such as free jazz (Philippe Carles, Jean-Louis Comolli, *Free Jazz Black Power*, Paris, 1971), funk (Ricky Vincent, *Funk*, New York, 1996), rock (Joe Carducci, *Rock and the Pop Narcotic*, Los Angeles, 1994), country (Nick Tosches, *Country*, London, 1989) or rai (Bouziane Daoudi, Hadj Miliani, *L'aventure du rai*: Paris, 1996) are duty-bound to defend generic integrity against commodification, and so make aesthetic distinctions. However, pop is not a musical genre: it is what sells. Hence writing on pop cries out for categories like capital, labour and commodity, since they are the determining forces in this 'genre'. Adorno's warnings about the consumption of false images of freedom are highly pertinent here: the listening ear needs to be rigorous about objective actualities of form.

In his acknowledgements, Simon Reynolds offers 'a fervent salute to the journalists and editors of the weekly rock papers of the late 1970s and early 1980s, his 'prime research resource'. However, he's wrong to call 1978–84 'the golden age for British music journalism'. It was certainly better than what passes for music journalism today. (How can an industry which couldn't even generate a hit denouncing the war in Iraq provide an object for serious criticism?) But the *real* golden age was the underground press of 1966–69; although the pre-punk *NME* (1975–77), with its relentless negativity about corporate label fads and ploys, was pretty hilarious too. Punk was its bruised and bloody offspring. That said, 1978 to 1984, when the *NME* vied with *Sounds* to cover the struggle against the National Front, was certainly compulsive reading. So much so, in fact, that anyone who read those weeklies then will yawn their way through Reynolds's book: fad follows fad with a remorseless lack of logic. The conscientious page-turner has no way of avoiding the imbecilities of Kevin Rowland, Martin Fry or Lydia Lunch. Despite the 126 extra interviews, the *NME* sets the template, and the book reads as a



breathless précis. Relief comes on page 517, when Reynolds loses faith in chart pop, and begins to make his own judgements. But it has been a long haul.

The author's 'subjective' viewpoint should not just be there to provide moral asides once a story has been told (like Robert McNamara looking glum about genocide in Vietnam); it is an essential moment in the unfolding of any objective account. What was *Reynolds* doing during this period? Which gigs did he attend? How did he earn a living? Did he meet anyone at gigs? Was he ever scared? How did punk and post-punk challenge his sense of identity, his view of the British class system? Without information about the storyteller, we can't get critical purchase on their story.

Reynolds has some political opinions, of course. We can plot them. He's a liberal, so the market is a force of nature. He thinks Thatcherism was a response to unions that were 'too strong'. He talks of interventionist governments 'propping up ailing industries to preserve jobs'. He also mentions 1970s 'race riots'. Now, the *Daily Telegraph* may have called them that, but everyone involved at street level recognized them as anti-police riots that brought whites, blacks and Asians together. A waft of confidence and good humour swept through the riot cities like some exhilarating drug.

The clichés come thick and fast: Tony Wilson's Factory Records used situationist ideas, but Guy Debord wouldn't have approved. Bob Last's Fast Product anticipated a new kind of left-wing sensibility, a "designer socialism" purged of its puritanical austerity and pleasure-fear'. Following the 'mods versus rockers' binary (half an idea baked into academic orthodoxy by Dick Hebdige and Simon Frith), Reynolds conceives pop as a natural homeostatic system, working 'through a kind of oscillating, internal pendulum, swinging back and forth between two extremes. Some kind of return to rock values (if not inevitably to guitar music) was bound to happen.' Postmodernism provides Reynolds with the sophistry to avoid musics outside his ken: hip-hop is dismissed as 'fantasies of rebellion and street knowledge'. In the first 500 pages the only pre-punk band mentioned is the Beatles, and this definition of pop music as victorious commercial product shapes the book. Reynolds would doubtless be aggrieved

to be called a racist – he’s appreciative of two-tone and the Specials, and even has the nous to realize Live Aid was collusive with Thatcherite anti-statism. But attention to sales figures rather than musical form inevitably underplays the contribution of blues, funk and reggae. He quotes Luc Sante on Blood Ulmer, Luther Thomas, Oliver Lake and Joe Bowie, but he has no inkling that No Wave Harmolodics was a Hendrix-scale leap forward in how rock can be played, a revolution forced underground by a music industry in retrenchment. (We had our own exponents, from Nottingham, called Pinski Zoo, but they didn’t chart, so they don’t count as ‘post-punk’.)

The black hole in pop opened up by the Sex Pistols led more adventurous punks to explore dub reggae, Free Improvisation and revolutionary politics. Reynolds, though, remains faithful to the commercial farce. This positivism deprives him of musical objectivity, of critical stance: all he can do is detail once again the careers of those whose names sold music papers. He’s aware that things got worse from The Pop Group through to ABC and Frankie Goes To Hollywood, a sorry decline into image, commercial scam and unit-shifting. However, lacking an understanding of how capitalism prioritizes product over musical event, Reynolds can only remark on a lack of ‘passion’, ‘inspiration’ and ‘substance’. Deprived of Adorno’s notion that truth might be at variance with society as currently constituted, Reynolds can’t function as a critic. His exclusive fixation on music that makes a return on capital (‘pop’) deprives him of any sense of the *struggle* involved in making music. There is no sign of the broken lives and bleak desperation caused by the brutal way the music industry siphons money away from working musicians and small venues. Real people are elsewhere; what we have is Narcissus in his bedroom, stacking his albums.

Walter Benjamin diagnosed morbidity as a symptom of commodity fixation and it is intriguing how often ‘marble slabs’ come up in Reynolds’s descriptions of beauty in music (Joy Division, Young Marble Giants and Scritti Politti). Christopher Gray’s *Leaving the Twentieth Century* (a pioneering translation of situationist texts issued in 1974) was apparently ‘*the* radical-chic fetish object of its era’. This description derives from Marcus’s glamorization of the book in *Lipstick Traces* (and the photo of a distressed cover in *The Incomplete Works of Jamie Reid*). But anyone who read *Leaving the Twentieth Century* at the time felt viciously alienated, not just from consumer objects, but from non-revolutionary contemporaries, music-scene small talk, academic protocol and pop-biz machinations. Debord’s polemics threw the reader into a storm of radical politics quite beyond Reynolds’s feeble radar. It was something you read and tried to put into action, but rarely mentioned (its Lukácsian terminology was usually incomprehensible to anyone with the nerve to carry out its proposals). This action-not-words spell cast by the situationists was only broken in the late 1980s, with the publication of *Lipstick Traces* and the advent of Stewart Home. Action is not a word in Reynolds’s vocabulary.

Thermidor as lukewarm shower

Reynolds detests the organized Left. Rock Against Racism is only mentioned in order to berate its ‘puritan’ dogmatism and to defend the ‘unaligned’ individual (in this case, the ridiculous Howard Devoto). In fact, it was the Left’s attention to punk that created his ‘golden age’ of music journalism. When Gavin Martin wrote sourly about the huge 1981 Leeds Carnival Against Racism in *NME*, the next week’s letters page carried nothing but indignant rebuttals. Reynolds opines that a single quote from Jerry Dammers ‘did more for anti-racism than a thousand Anti-Nazi League speeches’, but it was activists in the ANL who originally arrived at that conclusion! That’s why we headlined the Specials at the Leeds Carnival. It was precisely because the ANL was *not* centred around political speeches, but around gigs and street action, that it attracted support, and eventually smashed the National Front.

Musicians and grassroots promoters make gigs happen, escalate community, amplify socialist intelligence; moneymen and obsequious journalists manufacture stars, sell crap records and screw everything up. Reynolds is keen that we see things from this 'other side', appreciate the ambitions of entrepreneurs like Paul Morley and Trevor Horn, and break with the Left's 'guilt-racked puritanism'. This way we can all get a piece of the pie. But, as he admits at the end of *Rip It Up*, all he's left with at the end is an overblown and vacuous product like Frankie Goes To Hollywood, a boy-band prototype. Without attention to form, it is impossible to appreciate what is decimated by the commercial *ratio*: the delirious madness of a musical event, the beauty of unpredictability, the one-off situation. With his orthodox cultural studies agnosticism about musical form, Reynolds can only moralize retrospectively about the fame game. Critical spike crumbles to chatshow falafel.

By the end, as often in counter-revolutions, the 'theoreticians' mended the breach (Bob Last, Green Gartside, Trevor Horn, Tony Wilson) and successfully turned post-punk into a viable consumer option. The abysmal reign of New Order, Simple Minds and U2 beckoned. Reynolds notices that in formal terms, post-punk tunes by Wire, Josef K and Joy Division are similar to tunes by Altered Images, but he fails to draw the conclusion that it is the same paltry pabulum tweezed for different niche markets. In 1985, two journalists from the *NME* with ears alert enough to hear the straitened parameters of its 'alternative' – Richard Cook and Graham Lock – tried to introduce post-punk consumers to Free Improvisation. However, Derek Bailey was hardly chart fodder, so they left to join the jazz magazine *Wire*. The critique of capitalism and class society – so strikingly made by the Sex Pistols – was no longer deemed saleable. Instead it festered underground, until in the United States the grassroots networks built by Bad Brains and other Washington DC hardcore bands exploded at the Seattle protest against the World Trade Organization in 1999. That is a different story of course, but, like Free Improvisation and Harmolodics, simply to mention it reveals the pinched horizons of Reynolds's tale. Never trust a music writer who calls the Sons of the Pioneers 'anodyne'.

Reynolds's obsession with chart placings (abstract knowledge) rather than live gigs and personal response to records (concrete knowledge) explains the failure of *Rip It Up*. With no negative dialectic, the particular is never given its due, much less used as a critical lever on the general. The writer attempts to speak 'objectively' for the mass consumer, but this putative entity is abstract and dominated. However belletrist it may sound, properly objective cultural criticism needs to start by registering subjective (even disgraceful) responses. When music is treated as social fact rather than potential truth, the past will never make its 'tiger's leap' into the present. This is writing in which *nothing ever happens*.

Convinced that there is nothing relevant outside the text of the recorded product, Reynolds cannot explain the forces acting on the records he examines. In fact, he cannot interpret the records at all, and – paradoxically for someone who rarely acknowledges quirky, unofficial responses – emerges with something as arbitrary and subjective as 'taste'. This is because he remains obedient to the priorities and perspectives of the capitalist pop industry, allowing the commodity to dictate what constitutes musical culture. In *Rip It Up*, there is no appeal to the tribunal of live performance. But this is an essential element in decoding records. You only had to witness the gigs to know the Specials were a real collective – combined, conflictual and uneven – and that Dexy's Midnight Runners were a contrived charade. Without unrepentant insistence on the subjectivity of musical experience (Adorno hearing the opening of Mahler's First as 'the unpleasant whistling of an old steam engine', for example), pop writing won't achieve objectivity. It will just be witless and toothless.