

Transnational Punk Communities in Poland. From Nihilism to Nothing Outside Punk

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Punk has been on the academic radar for many years. In fact, early accounts date back to the very genesis of the phenomenon in mid-1970s' New York and London. It has been suggested more than once that a reason for the academic interest might be many scholar's personal entanglement with the punk subculture. Regardless of whether this generalization is true, Marta Marciniak clears things undoubtedly by introducing herself as a 'punk from Warsaw' (p. 219).

The book, based on Marciniak's dissertation in American Studies at the University at Buffalo, SUNY, wants to 'explore the story of how a subculture emerged and evolved over time through the communication of ideas across space' (p. xiii). Her 'two main research questions' (p. xviii) are the depth of US-American influence in Poland, their local 'adjustments' (ibid.), and the 'cultural diffusion' (p. xix) involved. As the title of her work suggests, the perspective is transnational; the author focuses on the exchange of people, concepts, and ideas from the late 1970s to the early 2010s, mainly (but not exclusively) between Poland and the United States. The main part of the book concentrates on developments after 1989; earlier developments are bundled up in shorter introductions of the respective chapters.

Her approach is topical, not chronological; Marciniak starts out with a brief history of punk abroad and in Poland (chapter one), describes local scenes in Silesia (chapter two), uses new sources to tackle the old questions of punk and politics (chapter three) and economies around punk (chapter four), and closes with a very short glimpse into the nexus of gender and punk (chapter five). The scope of her work is impressive, and the results insightful, but the book also leaves the reader with some questions.

Let's start out with a look into Marciniak's methodology. Her 'primary method' (p. xiv) is oral history, with interviews conducted in parts of Poland and the United States. Other than that, her findings rely on song lyrics and secondary sources such as websites (from band to label pages), online encyclopedias and data bases, newspaper articles, all the way to online platforms such as youtube and facebook. Aside from some video documentaries, the body of secondary literature spans from the 1970s to the 2010s, containing classical works by Stuart Hall of CCCS as well as texts by pioneering pop journalists such as Greil Marcus and Lester Bangs.

Marciniak's 'primary method' is surely legitimate, but her application has certain issues as she elevates oral history to being the *ne plus ultra*, largely dismissing primary written sources as less valuable, even misleading. She explicitly targets a fellow scholar on punk for having a 'limited view' (p. xx), because of his "failure" of not using oral history as a primary (or only) method. [1] Despite the simple fact that the choice of sources depends on the particular research interest, Marciniak repeats more than once that getting insight into the punk subculture is implicitly bound to being part of it. By so doing, she walks deep into the positivistic trap: Stating that her personal affiliation with the subject matter helps to portray the 'reality' (p. xviii), based on what she was 'seeing, hearing, and feeling' (p. xx) seems highly problematic. As scholars we volunteer narratives and interpretations, based on a rigid evaluation and interpretation of whatever sources at hand, but we never deliver a one and only "reality".

Marciniak's findings are impressive nevertheless. The leitmotif of her narrative is the transnational flow of ideas, persons and goods that shaped punk as a subculture. The origins of Polish punk are traced back to cultural transfers from the United States, often mediated through other countries, to Poland. She identifies copied and countless re-copied music tapes as main media of early distribution, as well as magazines or fanzines smuggled from the West. Numerous personal networks and connections are mentioned between the Germanies and Poland (e.g. pp. 33, 48, 53f., 64f.). The author also discovers that the transfers went the other way, when, in later years, people from the United States developed an interest in Central-/Eastern European punk music (pp. 49f., 187). In that light, punk reflects broader developments in pop culture, notably its increasing diversification and transnational flow.

What makes Marciniak's approach particularly interesting is her ability to link the local with the global, stressing both outside influence and local agency. As she puts it, local punk scenes are 'not transferable elsewhere' (p. xxi), even though they consist 'of the same basic building blocks' (ibid.). She even identifies a strong regionalism and local patriotism in local punk scenes (pp. 96ff.). In that respect, punk appears as 'local and universal phenomenon' (p. xxi) alike. Especially by illustrating Silesian punk scenes and its local protagonists, multipliers and central agents in chapter two, Marciniak makes clear that the 'local' is not simply formed by anonymous 'universal', transnational forces. As the 'building blocks' do not come as a simple transfer, but interact with local appropriations, they shape and are constantly being reshaped. With those reshaped and appropriated 'building blocks' crossing borders again, in this case back to the US from Poland, "the global" seems to be much more informed by "the local" than the other way around.

So, what is punk anyways? What are those 'building blocks'? Here, punk is identified as a heterogeneous, 'transnational community of people' (p. xvi), with 'several characteristics of a social movement' (ibid.). [2] It is linked by style and music, the author tells us, as well as by specific modes of production and consumption, above all a pronounced DIY-ethic. Punk today, the reader learns, is basically a creative and somehow critical subculture. What exactly does that mean? How does that translate into the sphere of the political? Where has »No Future« gone?

Marciniak points out 'political and ideological paradoxes of punk' (p. xxi) in chapter three. Among her findings, those paradoxes and punk's iconoclastic furor between the left, the right and the (seemingly) "a-political" become clearly visible. Fundamentally tied to the "here and now", the political in punk seems largely based on

being anti-"establishment", anti-"mainstream" (whatever that exactly means). And as we know from other subcultures, it follows that if anything becomes visible "outside", it loses its acceptability "inside" (p. 110). How does this connect to punk's modes of production, distribution, and consumption?

As the author rightly suggests, looking at politics in punk most of all means looking at its economic base and conduct (chapter four). Punk with all its deconstructions and reconfigurations has always been a prime example for 'hip consumerism' [3], an "anti-mainstream" consumerism with distinct rules and practices. Without using that term, the author describes some of its basic principles and mechanisms, applied to punk and her oral history sources (pp. 124f.). Her findings, to pick out one example, reveal a strong emphasis on DIY-ethics in the 'punk economy' (p. 128). 'Punk shopping' (p. 124) generally follows strict rules and principles, as do the production and distribution.

'Hip consumerism' is interlinked with the idea of 'hip capitalism' [4], which describes the production and distribution regimes of punk. Again, punk is anti-capitalist (p. 172) only with regards to "mainstream" capitalism; following certain sets of rules and codes seemingly absolves punk entrepreneurs of being on the "wrong" side. Based on her sources from the US and Poland, the author describes the thin line between running an enterprise and "selling out" inside the 'punk economy', by investigating record labels, festivals, venues, shops, or fanzines. She makes very clear that the line often turns so thin that it becomes invisible, e.g. in respect to so-called "indie-labels". She rightly concludes that ultimately, the 'punk economy' is nothing else but 'part of the overall economy' (p. 136), in Poland and elsewhere.

The author sometimes gets carried away by her own fascination for the topic. Of course punk is unique to pop culture (p. xxiv), as is every other subculture; sure enough, almost every subculture (and not only punk) considers itself 'oppositional and autonomous' (p. xvii); and phenomena such as DIY or hip consumerism most certainly existed long before punk. Despite that, the work is informative, insightful and impressive. The enormous workload involved, e.g. transcribing (and partly translating) all those interviews, wows the reader from the start. The outcome sheds new light on a still underrepresented facet of cultural history: the transnational in pop cultures, questions about its agencies, its relations between "the local" and "the global". Marciniak also gives hints as to where her future work could go, e.g. combining her oral history with other works and sources that reflect the reaction of authorities and public discourse (p. xx). As alienation through modernity is highlighted as a prerequisite for punk, it might be interesting to deepen aspects of authenticity and identity as, again, she repeatedly hints at herself (pp. xv, 31, 57, 84, 124f.). Anyways—even though some of my questions remained unanswered, one thing seems certain: Wherever future research on Polish punk might go, Marta Marciniak added to the fundament it will have to build on.

[1] Remigiusz Kacprzycki, *Dekada buntu. Punk w Polsce i krajach sąsiednich w latach 1977-1989* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Libron, 2013), 500 pp.

[2] What exactly are those characteristics? One might look at e.g. Ron Eyerman / Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements. Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998), 191pp.

[3] Frank Thomas, *The Conquest of Cool. Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 287 pp.

[4] Susan Krieger, *Hip Capitalism* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1979), 304pp.



Zitierweise:

Alexander Simmeth: Rezension zu: Marta Marciniak: *Transnational Punk Communities in Poland. From Nihilism to Nothing Outside Punk*, 2015, in: <https://www.pol-int.org/de/node/2740#r4512>.

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