PAY NO
MORE

PUNK: DANGEROUS UTOPIA



PUNK: DANGEROUS UTOPIA

THE CONTENTIOUS SYMBIOSIS OF PUNK AND ANARCHISM

This is the foreword to *Smash The System! Punk Anarchism as a Culture of Resistance,* a book published by Active Distribution: anarchismandpunk.noblogs.org

"Punk rock equals anarchy plus guitars and drums. Anything less is just submission."

-Italian punk

Let's imagine the ideal cultural vehicle for anarchism.

It has to be defiant, obviously. It should accommodate both gleeful irony and stark courage. But let's make it affirmative, too, even if we have to go the long way round through suffering and catharsis to get there. We don't want the kind of nihilism that makes it hard to get out of bed in the morning—we want the kind that keeps people out all night causing trouble.

For starters, then, we'll set our point of departure in the creative arts: music, fashion, design, graffiti, writing, photography, petty crime. These are fundamentally affirmative even when they express anger and despair—and the start-up costs are pretty low. Put the music front and center, so literacy isn't a barrier.

Aesthetically, we'll want it raw and disruptive. Throw out all claims to expertise; make a clean sweep of the classics. At the most, we can retain a few of the innovations that the music industry stole from working-class people. Afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted.

Economically, if we can't unilaterally break with the capitalist mode of production, let's build in some norms to counteract its effects: price controls ("pay no more than two quid"), a loathing of profiteering and all things corporate, a do-it-yourself ethic. Place all the emphasis on things that can't be bought. If that means an embattled discourse about "authenticity," so be it.

This subculture has to be inclusive—and not just in the superficial sense

associated with the liberal politics of representation. Rather than just preaching to the converted, it should draw in people from a wide range of backgrounds and politics. We want to reach the same young folks who are going to be targeted by military recruiters, and we want to reach them *first.* Sure, that will mean rubbing shoulders with a lot of people who are not anarchists—it will mean a big messy stew of different politics and conflicts and contradictions—but the goal is to *spread* anarchism, not to hide out in it. Get everyone together in a space premised on horizontality, decentralization, self-determination, reproducible models, being ungovernable, and so on and let them discover the advantages for themselves.

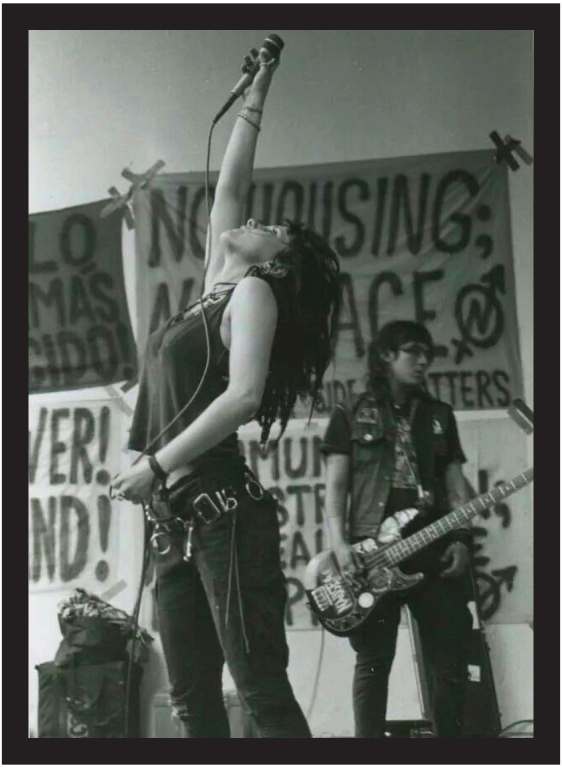
The most important thing is the participation of those who are poor, volatile, and angry. Not out of any misguided notion of charity, but rather because the so-called dangerous classes are usually the motor force of change from below. The self-satisfied and well-behaved lack the risk tolerance essential for making history and reinventing culture.

Picture a self-education society without instructors, ranks, or lesson plans. Teenagers will teach themselves to play drums by watching other teenagers play drums. They won't learn about politics in dusty tomes, but by publishing zines about their own experiences and corresponding with people on the other side of the planet. Every time well-known musicians perform, musicians who are just getting started will perform, too. Learning won't be a distinct sphere of activity, but an organic component of every aspect of the community.

Dadaism and Surrealism were OK, but "Poetry must be written by all, not one," as Comte de Lautréamont put it. Our ideal subculture isn't a coterie of artists—it's more like a network of underclass gangs in which *everyone* has a band, a zine, or at least a criminal record. The art isn't just what's happening on the stage—it's the designs people inscribe on their jackets and shirts and bodies, the dancing and kissing and fighting and vandalism, the *atmosphere* they create together. The collective mythos of a worldwide grassroots movement. Let that mythos be contested territory—the conflict will keep people invested.

Our subculture will be Dionysian—sensual, spontaneous, *wild*—an uncontrollable geyser of raw feeling. The Apollonian (the rational, the intentional, the orderly) will follow the chaotic energy that drives this movement, not precede it. Intellectual proposals can build on adrenaline, lust, violence, and pleasure, but they can't substitute for them.

So nothing sanctimonious, nothing triumphalist or moralistic. Better a gritty romanticism that sees dignity in defeat as well as victory, an unpretentious attitude that says "nothing human is alien to me."


NO HOUSING;
MÁS
VER!
ND!

This subculture should be a space where people can learn about the politics of consent and assert their boundaries against invasive authority figures, entitled men, and other pests. At the same time, it should spread a rebel sociality that erodes the physical and emotional confines that individualize the capitalist subject. "Our utopia is not a world in which no one ever bumps into you—it's a world in which everyone crashes into each other and it is joyous and good, in which it *means something different* when people crash into you."

Not an anodyne utopia in which there is no fighting, but a *dangerous utopia* in which there are things worth fighting for. Not a Potemkin Village concealing the fault lines that run through society, but an arena in which you can take a stand in those conflicts on the scale of your own life. Not the anarchist equivalent of the Red Pioneers—complete with doddering leadership and tedious traditions—but an open space of freedom in which each generation makes its own mistakes and charts its own path.

From this point of departure, we can pan back to an entire alternative way of living: self-organized venues and infoshops, collective housing, squatting, Food Not Bombs, reading groups, affinity groups, feminism, veganism, non-monogamy, eco-defense, militant unemployment—the sky's the limit. A worldwide network of countercultural spaces and movements and lifestyles. A chain reaction of rebellions going off like a string of fireworks encircling the globe.

Only now, with the benefit of hindsight, can we grasp how lucky we have been to participate in one of the greatest countercultural folk art movements of the past several hundred years.

UNIONS. HIPPIES. PUNKS. MILLENNIALS.

"If there's any hope for America, it lies in a revolution, and if there's any hope for a revolution in America, it lies in getting Elvis Presley to become Che Guevara."
-Phil Ochs

"Punks is hippies."
-GISM

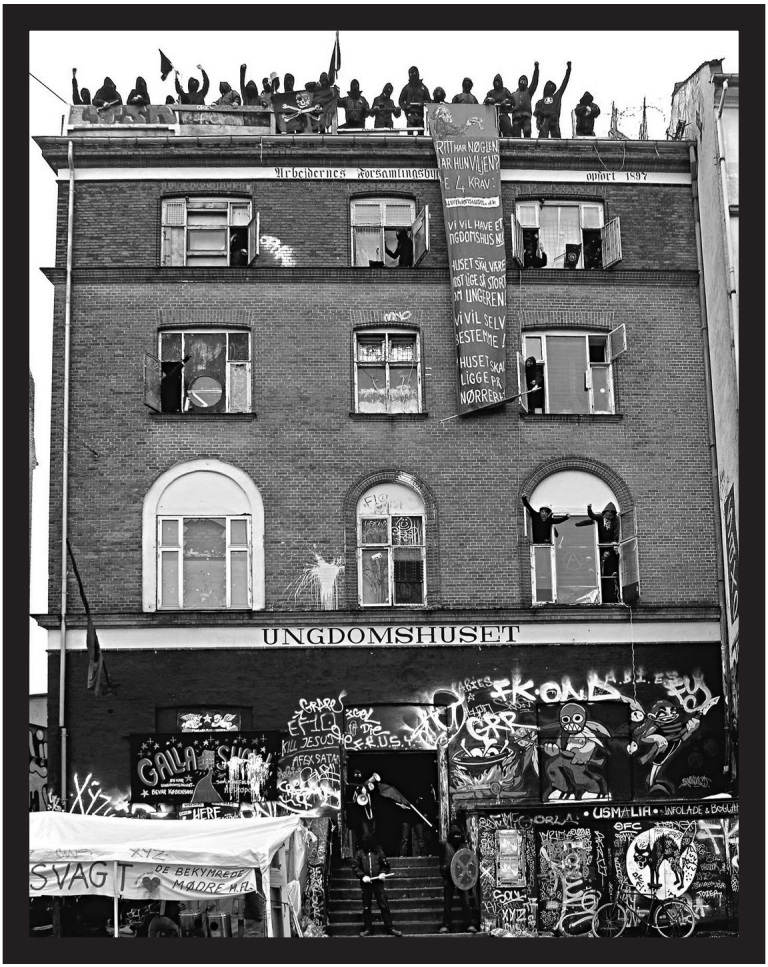
Now let's situate the emergence of this counterculture historically, in the second half of the 20th century.

The powerful and rebellious labor movements of the early 20th century had been bought off, abandoning demands for self-determination in return for higher wages, cheaper consumer goods, and more job security—the so-called Fordist Compromise, though the same thing went by the name "socialism" in the Eastern Bloc. Thus integrated into the self-regulation of the market, the union bureaucracy was slowly being outflanked by corporate outsourcing as capitalism transformed the entire earth into a single integrated supply chain.

Stalinism, fascism, the Second World War, two Red Scares, and the Cold War had crushed the anarchist movements of the early 20th century, polarizing most of humanity into a binary between false freedom and false equality that boiled down to a choice between the CIA and the KGB. Those born after the Second World War grew up with no horizon for social change beyond trying to reform one side of this dichotomy or the other.

At the same time, thanks to Fordism, the baby boomers had access to a wider range of commodities than any previous generation. Corporate marketing encouraged young people to understand themselves as a distinct group with their own interests and aspirations. Mass-produced youth culture inadvertently generated the possibility of mass refusal of mainstream culture, creating new shared reference points that cut across older national, cultural, and social divisions.

Originally a working-class art form emerging from Black communities in the United States, rock music was one of the commodities that capitalists


Arbejdernes Forsamlingshus
opført 1897
VI VIL HAVE ET UNGDOMSHUS NU
HUSET SKAL VÆRE JUST DER, SÅ STORT SOM UNGDOMMEN
VI VIL SELV BESTEMME I
HUSET SKAL LIGGE PÅ NØRREBRO
UNGDOMSHUSET
SVAGT
DE BEKYMREDE MØDRE-HÆR

began to cultivate as a cash crop for this mass market. In this context, the success of the Beatles represented the anyone-can-make-it dream of economic mobility—but it was also an incomplete effort to appropriate and domesticate working-class youth rebellion. The fact that four ordinary Liverpudlian proletarians, availed of all the recording technology and popular attention of an entire civilization, could go from singing "Love Me Do" in 1962 to recording the "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" LP in 1967 implied a utopian possibility that exceeded anything the market could fulfill: if we *all* had such opportunities, couldn't *all of us* be artists? The lads from Liverpool, like the generation who grew up on their music, discovered they were not satisfied with the options at their disposal, even at the top of the pyramid—and the social bodies that had coalesced through shared consumer activity rebelled against the conformity and alienation of mass society.

In his book, *Do It!,* arch-yippie Jerry Rubin credited the unrest of the 1960s to this progression: "The New Left sprang, a predestined pissed-off child, from Elvis's gyrating pelvis." The generation that started out rebelling against its parents' sexual repression by listening to rock and roll ended up occupying universities and protesting in the streets. By the time of the Woodstock festival in August 1969, this counterculture was millions strong.

Despite the anti-authoritarian spirit of these youth cultures, the resurgence of anarchism proper was limited. Anarchists established a presence in the campaign for nuclear disarmament in Britain and represented an influential minority within Students for a Democratic Society in the United States. Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, the "street gang with an analysis," translated the Spanish anarchist concept of *grupos de afinidad* into the Anglophone model of affinity groups; thus equipped, they stormed the Pentagon, cut the fences at Woodstock, and brought their mimeograph machine with them when they occupied Bill Graham's rock music venue to demand a free night for the people. Yet as the decade wore on, authoritarian Marxists won power struggles within the leadership of many of the movements of the era. Like Marx's coup within the International Workingmen's Association a century earlier, these pyrrhic victories contributed to the collapse of the movements themselves.

Within the counterculture, the star system introduced its own hierarchies. At Woodstock, half a million people watched from the mud as a series of celebrities took the stage.

Meanwhile, capitalists had begun incorporating hippie demands for individuality and diversity into the market. This coincided with the transition from straightforward Fordist mass production to increasingly diversified

consumer goods and identities—the shift from *economies of scale* to *economies of scope*. If Beatlemania had exemplified mass culture, the emergence of metal, punk, and hip hop in the 1970s exemplified the "post-Fordist" proliferation of subcultures.

In summer 1976—one hundred years after the death of Mikhail Bakunin, fourteen years after the recording of "Love Me Do," and seven years after the Woodstock festival—the Sex Pistols made their first television appearance, performing "Anarchy in the UK," the song that became their debut single. "Bakunin would have loved it," the television host quipped when they were done.

Here it is, at the public premiere of punk proper: the proof of punk's anarchist credentials. All the attempts to water it down came after.

So yes, punk was a reaction to the countercultures of the 1960s. Pistols singer Johnny Rotten opened that television performance with a derisive phrase about Woodstock, rejecting everything self-satisfied and naïve about the hippie era—all the ways in which, in seeming to succeed, the hippies had been neutralized and assimilated.

But punk was also a continuation of those countercultures. It recapitulated the same process of radicalization that Jerry Rubin's generation had experienced—only intensified, like a bacteria that had become immune to antibiotics. From the beginning, punks took great pains to distinguish themselves from hippies; in retrospect, punk was everything hippie that couldn't be domesticated and commodified. Not festival stages, but basement shows; not tie-dyes and peace signs, but leather jackets and street fighting à la Up Against the Wall Motherfucker. What is a punk band, after all, but an affinity group with guitars? Discussing the Sex Pistols, John Lennon remarked that the Pistols were intentionally doing all the things that the Beatles' management had forbade them to do at the outset of their commercial career.

A year after the Pistols debuted "Anarchy in the UK," Crass (one of the first punk bands identified with the redundancy "anarcho-punk") got started at a collective living project that members Penny Rimbaud and Gee Vaucher had founded in 1967. We can trace punk's pedigree through Crass directly back to the hippies, complete with the pacifism that the next generation of punks shook off.

As a part of the post-Fordist shift, music publishing and printing technology were finally becoming widely accessible to the general public. Crass was one of a new wave of do-it-yourself punk bands who released their own records. (The story goes that they had to press 5000 copies of their debut LP because that was the minimum run that a pressing plant would produce at the time.) By

self-managing the production process rather than selling themselves to a label, they were able to hijack the mystique that decades of capitalist investment and promotion had vested in the rock industry, reclaiming it for the sort of autonomous youth subcultures that had produced rock'n'roll in the first place.

At the same time, volatile globalized markets were undermining the job security of the mid-20th century. In 1977, the children of redundant workers could read the writing on the wall, echoed in the lyrics of the next Sex Pistols' hit: "No future." Punk caught on among the forerunners of today's superfluous workforce at a time when the futureless were still a bitter, isolated minority. It was the song of the canary in the coal mine.

But it took decades for Fordism to collapse entirely, vanishing along with the complacent masses it had produced. It wasn't until 2007 that the Invisible Committee, in *The Coming Insurrection,* could write

> "The future has no future" is the wisdom of an age that, for all its appearance of perfect normalcy, has reached the level of consciousness of the first punks.

Today, in a time of widespread economic and environmental crises, pandemic, and war, when practically no one anticipates a bright future anymore, punk has become redundant, at least as a minoritarian rejection of capitalist optimism and aesthetics.

If we don't set punk in its historical context—as a reinvention of preexisting forms of resistance in response to particular conditions—we won't understand its strengths or the limits it reached. Considering the changes that were taking place in the labor market and consumer identity, it is not surprising that from the 1980s on, even the most doctrinaire anarcho-syndicalists were initially politicized through punk music rather than workplace organizing. Likewise, to understand why punk plateaued in the early 21st century, we have to recognize the ways that it anticipated and then was subsumed by the online networks, participatory models, and volatile identities of the Digital Age.

From the 1970s to the turn of the millennium, almost everyone with confrontational tendencies was effectively quarantined in a distinct subculture. But as the shift from *economies of scale* to *economies of scope* accelerated, these subcultures ceased to be discrete, long-term affiliations. Today, people stack up consumer identities like trading cards, and many subcultural identifiers last no longer than it takes to circulate a meme. It has become as difficult to isolate rebellion in particular social groups as it is to constitute a coherent revolutionary subject.

Likewise, the underground economy based in do-it-yourself networks prefigured contemporary hyper-capitalism, in which the self-management of our marketability extends into every aspect of our social lives and leisure time. Crass and their contemporaries achieved a breakthrough by using formats that had previously been inaccessible to the working class to spread subversive messages, but in the process, they unwittingly pioneered and validated a new form of entrepreneurship, paving the way for less politicized entrepreneurs. All the shortcomings punks identified in the unidirectional capitalist media of the late 20th century ("Kill your television!") inform the participatory capitalist media of our own day. Who needs to go to band practice when you can make a video on your smart phone and post it to Tik Tok immediately? *Do it yourself!*

Of course, social media platforms have hardly tamed the new generation. Continuing the process of assimilation and reinvention, today's uprisings draw on every aspect of punk that could not be domesticated, commodified, or outflanked. Riots without punk shows; black sweatshirts without patches on them, so the police can't identify you; defiance and rebellion without anthems, without aesthetics, without hope.

If anything, we have overcorrected against the vestiges of the hippie era that persisted in the first phase of punk. When the Pistols came out, they were reacting against a subculture that involved too much art, and not enough rebellion; too much entertainment, and not enough disruption; too much optimism, and not enough reality. As we move deeper into a century that is already characterized by destruction and despair, we could do with a little more art, creativity, and optimism.

This is one of the many reasons punk remains relevant in 2022.

> "Today, in the anarchist movement, we sometimes miss the Dionysian spirit that characterized the hardcore punk underground at its high point: the collective, embodied experience of dangerous freedom. This is how punk can inspire us in our anarchist experiments of today and tomorrow: as a transformative outlet for rage and grief and joy, a positive model for togetherness and self-determination in our social relations, an example of how the destructive urge can also be creative."
>
> —"Music as a Weapon: The Contentious Symbiosis of Punk Rock and Anarchism"

***

History is not divided neatly into periods; it's more like a series of sedimentary layers comprising the present. Tonight, as you read this, a symphony orchestra is performing uptown, a jazz band is playing downtown, and a punk band is playing out in the suburbs.

Punk's not dead, I know—Punk's not dead, I know it's not.

If we understand punk as an heir to longstanding traditions of resistance, this will explain its persisting importance to anarchism. While an older generation of labor-oriented radicals used to deride punks' political commitments as ephemeral, punk is much older—and stabler—than today's contemporary political organizing models; it dates from a time when subcultures still produced lasting identifications and commitments. Small wonder if many of those who still maintain the infrastructure of anarchist organizing from one year to the next are longtime punks. Punk combines the engaging agitprop and global networks of 21st-century cultural movements with the longevity of pre-internet political formations.

CODA: TESTIMONY

My friend's punk band is playing in the backward little Southern town next to mine. The venue is a fallout shelter from the Cold War. It's called The Fallout Shelter.

A police car pulls up in front of the venue and an officer gets out. While the officer is hassling the punks on the sidewalk, my friend slips across the street. He gets down on his elbows and knees, crawls behind the police car, and punctures its tire with his pocketknife.

The cop has to radio for backup. All evening, between bands, punks drink on the sidewalk and applaud ironically as the police struggle to replace the tire.

***

The first week of high school, Seven Seconds plays the one club in my little town. The show ends the way every big hardcore show there does—in a massive skinhead brawl that spills out onto the main drag.

I go to class the next morning with a bruise on my arm in the precise shape of a Doc Martens boot print. It marks me: *I'm not part of your world.*

***

Over the following decade, I join a band, I start a zine, I engage in endless debates about dancing, fashion, food, and fighting. I befriend the people who work night shift at the copy shop down the street. I stay up all night photocopying zines there, strictly off the books. Somebody in Czech Republic mails me a copy of the Kritická Situace LP in trade for my zine. I take the LP to the listening station at the public library because I don't have a record player. I drive twelve hours to play a show attended by bruisers who have pledged to attack me on sight. I set up shows for bands. I release records.

Our band goes on tour. Night after night, people host and sometimes even feed us. We buy a van together. We travel around the country, playing self-organized venues and staying at collective houses. Overseas, we see our first giant squatted buildings, with banners hanging on the walls and movement archives and bicycle repair shops serving the neighborhood. It starts to dawn on us that we're part of something much bigger than we imagined.

It is only after three months on tour that I realize that I have shifted from thinking in the first-person singular to the first-person plural. *We.*

***

We meet the old-timers from the Crass generation. They've all got a couple decades on us; we're the youngest ones at all the shows in the UK. A member of Doom drives us around the British Isles in their van, since we're not accustomed to driving on the left side of the road.

One night, the fellow from Doom stays up late talking with a member of the Subhumans. They end up arguing about whether the Clash ruined punk by selling out to a corporate record label. I get the impression they've been having the same argument for twenty years. Still, it helps me to think of my own commitments on a longer time frame.

***

Reclaim the Streets—Millions for Mumia—the National Conference on Organized Resistance—the Presidential Inauguration. During every conference, before or after every protest, there is a punk show. Not just bands, but puppet shows, performance art, radical cheerleading. Itinerant punks set up literature tables consisting entirely of Noam Chomsky books shoplifted from Barnes & Noble bookstores. Sometimes the black bloc sets out directly from the mosh pit.

***

In Sâo Paulo, I attend a demonstration against a monument celebrating 500 years of colonialism. Everyone is masked up. The punks behind us throw paint bombs at the monument and rocks at the lines of riot police in front of us. The police shoot live rounds over our heads. Afterwards, we hide out inside an açai stand so the cops don't target us for the paint on our clothes.

A couple days later, Abuso Sonoro plays in Guarujá. The guitarist performs wearing the same mask he wore at the demonstration. *A worldwide culture of resistance.*

***

The first time we pull up to Ungdomshuset, the squatted punk venue in Copenhagen, every window in the neighborhood is boarded up. There was some unrest here the night before, our hosts explain, because the police want to deport a man to Turkey. After the show, while we sleep in the guest room, police sit outside the building in an armored car, reciting threats over a loudspeaker to the punks standing guard on the roof.

The fourth time we visit Ungdomshuset, there are too many of us to sleep in the guest room. Instead, our hosts unfold gym mats across the length of the entire great hall. We unroll our sleeping bags and lie down in a line, thirty or more of us—the bands, the organizers, and every random traveler who doesn't have another place to stay, together under the vaulted ceiling of the building in which International Women's Day was announced in 1910. Let the earth be a common treasury for all.

Before I go to sleep, I turn to the person bedding down to my left. "Where are you from?"

"Me? I'm from Australia," she answers. "Where are you from?"

A year later, police raid and demolish the building in the biggest operation in Denmark since World War Two. The city riots for a week; demonstrations continue weekly for a year. Plans are in motion for thousands of people to forcibly occupy City Hall when the government relents and grants the squatters a new building.

The next time I go to Denmark with a band, we play there, at the new Ungdomshuset.

***

Years later, during the Occupy movement, a new generation filters into the anarchist community in our little Southern town. They're the first ones to arrive without having punk as a reference point.

"But you have to do a workshop about punk, too," Liz says to me, after a direct action training.

"A workshop? Why? Punk is just a style of music, it's not essential to this stuff," I answer. Decades of arguments about subcultural insularity have made me a little touchy on this subject.

"Maybe, but for all of you who knew each other before this, punk is like a sorority you were in, or a secret society. A bunch of references to bands we've never heard of, like a private code. It only comes up when you're socializing with each other, but… that's how people form intimacy, right? You have to let us in on it."

***

A few years later, the anarchist student group at the local university asks us older townies to come make a presentation. I expect they want us to talk about security culture or consensus process or the Spanish Civil War. In fact, they want us to tell them about punk.

Roxy and I commandeer a full-length mirror from the abandoned glass factory next to my house and bring it into the classroom. We set it up facing the audience. I begin reciting a boring lecture in a button-up shirt, like a professor. While their eyes are on me, Roxy swings a baseball bat into the mirror, sending shards flying everywhere, and the d-beat kicks in.

"There—now why would we do that?" she asks them, afterwards, and their answers tell them everything they need to know about what punk is. Whatever conception you have of yourself and the world you see yourself in, smash it—whatever you consider bad luck, do it right now—and begin from there, remaking yourself and the world.

***

For more hardcore anarchism:
CRIMETHINC.COM

SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN

SLOGAN

CrimethInc.

SLOGAN

SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN SLOGAN