

Punk in Belfast, Northern Ireland: Critical Perspectives on the Troubles and Post-conflict “Peace” 

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The Oxford Handbook of Punk Rock

Edited by George McKay and Gina Arnold

Subject: Music, Musicology and Music History Online Publication Date: Oct 2020

DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190859565.013.17

Abstract and Keywords

Punk’s resonance has been felt strongly here. Against the backdrop of the Troubles and the “post-conflict” situation in Northern Ireland, punk has provided an anti-sectarian alternative culture. The overarching conflict of the Troubles left gaps for punk to thrive in, as well as providing the impetus for visions of an “Alternative Ulster,” but the stuttering shift from conflict to post-conflict has changed what oppositional identities and cultures look like. With the advent of “peace” (or a particular version of it at least) in the late 1990s, this space is being squeezed out by “development” agendas while counterculture is co-opted and neutered—and all the while sectarianism is further engrained and perpetuated. This chapter examines punk’s positioning within (and against) the conflict-warped terrain of Belfast, especially highlighting punk’s critical counter-narrative to the sectarian, neoliberal “peace.”

Keywords: punk, Belfast, Northern Ireland, Ulster, peace, conflict, the Troubles, sectarianism, counterculture, anarchism

Ulster¹ was (and is) a “unique ‘stronghold’” for punk (O’Neill and Trelford 2003, v). Belfast had a place of prominence in the early punk era: the Clash posed for photos beside British Army squaddies after their cancelled gig in 1977; Crass, DIRT, and Poison Girls played the “Anarchy Centre” punk club in the early 1980s; and the twenty-nine-year conflict of the Troubles (1969–1998) was lyrical fodder for everyone from the Sex Pistols (“Anarchy in the UK,” 1976), to Conflict (“The Ungovernable Force,” 1986), to the Au Pairs (“Armagh,” 1981), to the Pogues (“Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six,” 1988). Homegrown bands like Stiff Little Fingers and the Undertones found commercial success and became seminal punk staples, and the Good Vibrations label was part of the decentralizing tide of DIY(ish) punk production—but punk mattered (and still matters) here in ways that it did not elsewhere. In a society divided deeply along national-ethno-religious cleavages, punk has provided an alternative identity and cultural space that is not just *nonsectarian* but is actively *anti-sectarian*.

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Figure 1. “The Troubles and Beyond” exhibit at the Ulster Museum, permanent display. Clockwise from left: clothes donated by Greg Cowan of the Outcasts (on loan from the Oh Yeah! Centre); gig poster (c. early 1980s); gig ticket (c. early 1980s); gig ticket 1987. Photos taken November 2018.

Figure 1 shows some “artifacts” from the Ulster Museum’s “The Troubles and Beyond” exhibition (National Museums NI 2018). The mannequin in the old garb is perturbing—punk is entombed in a glass display case, condemned to a historic moment, a calcified curio, a spent spectacle (and this process of “nostalgification” is resisted by contemporary punks in Belfast, as discussed below—see also Stewart 2019). But it is striking that punk is so prominent in this historic account of the Troubles. Visitors following the suggested path through the museum start at the “The Troubles and Beyond” exhibit, and the punk mannequin is the first thing one encounters in that display. *Punk is front and center in Northern Ireland’s own conception of itself.* This recognition of punk carries over into the scholarly literature on the Troubles—which is surprising, because punk is often overlooked altogether in other areas of “serious” academia. Volumes with sober titles such as *Governing Ethnic Conflict: Consociation, Identity and the Price of Peace* (Finlay 2011), *The Troubles in Northern Ireland and Theories of Social Movements* (Bosi and De Fazio 2017), *Northern Ireland after the Troubles: A Society in Transition* (Coulter and Murray 2008), and *The Contested Identities of Ulster Protestants* (Burgess and Mulvenna 2015), as well as articles on the Cultural Traditions Group (Finlayson 1997), sectarianism in the Ardoyne (Shirlow 2003), and even Paisleyism (Gallagher 1981), all at least mention punk, even if it is rarely the focus. This recognition is also reflected in the everyday experience of being a punk in Belfast nowadays—more often than violent abuse or attack, an overt punk aesthetic draws approving nods from people a decade or two older who eagerly inform that they “usta² be a punk,” and a tale from “back in the day” will likely ensue (and note well that “their day” is always “the day” no matter when that was). This recognition is significant, but in each of the museum, academic, and bar-propping contexts, this risks

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succumbing to dewy-eyed nostalgia. Gary Fahy, of Punkerama Records in Belfast, notes the “growing nostalgia for punk music in Northern Ireland” (quoted in BBC 2015), especially for bands from the late 1970s and early 1980s such as Rudi, the Outcasts, the Defects, Protex, Ruefrefx, the Undertones, and Stiff Little Fingers. In September 2018 a blue plaque³ was unveiled at the Trident Bar in Bangor, County Down, to commemorate it as the “birthplace of the Ulster punk scene 1977.” The “nostalgic” scholarly analysis of punk in Northern Ireland from this period views it “as a kind of community relations programme *avant la lettre*” (Finlay 2011, xii), or “an original ‘community relations council’” (McLoone 2004, 33), bringing together young people from both sides of the national-ethno-religious divide despite the condition of (near) civil war going on around them.⁴ However, some academics have been quick to dismiss this “rose-tinted” view of punk in Northern Ireland (see Bell 1990, 1996; Rolston 2001; McLoone 2004)—Bell even goes as far as to make the absurd suggestion that punk was responsible for reinvigorating loyalism in the 1980s and 1990s (in Finlay 2011, xii). These academics are right to critique the simple narrative of early punk as a forgotten panacea to the Troubles, but in common with most punk nostalgists, their recognition of punk only extends to a narrow historical window in the late 1970s and early 1980s—Campbell and Smyth describe it as “the short-lived subculture of punk” (2008, 239), and McLoone writes that “it did not last of course” (2004, 36). As argued elsewhere (Donaghey 2013), this “early punk” historical calcification correlates with the rise and fall of commercial music industry interest in punk, an approach that is antithetical to the DIY and anti-capitalist ethos that runs through punk, and one which completely neglects the continued significance of punk in Northern Ireland through the 1980s and 1990s, and into the “post-conflict” era of the 2000s and 2010s (Stewart 2014b, 40).

This chapter challenges the historicized, neatly packaged analyses of punk in Northern Ireland, whether of the rose-tinted or dismissive variants, and points to the continued significance of punk as a critical and oppositional culture and identity. Almost all the interviewees and bands mentioned here have an association with the Warzone Collective, an anarchist punk group in Belfast that has been releasing records, running social centers, and organizing gigs (among a wide array of other cultural production and activism) since the early 1980s. This provides a focus in the selection of material, but it also provides the anarchist grounding for the critiques of sectarianism, neoliberalism, conflict, and “peace.”

“You say you usta be a punk?”/“Fuck nostalgia”

Iconoclasm was a defining feature of punk’s initial emergence into the popular consciousness in the mid-to-late 1970s. In the contemporary punk scene in Belfast, this iconoclastic sensibility is expressed in opposition to punk nostalgia and ridicule of “icons” of the early punk period. This trope is evident as early as 1990 when Pink Turds in Space dedicated their cover of the Undertones’ 1978 hit single “Teenage Kicks” to “Feargal Sharkey’s chin” (1990d)—the cover is more parody than homage, stripping out the original’s bubblegum musicality and saccharine adolescence to be replaced with a screamed, fifty-five-

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second blast of thrash-crossover punk. In the 2000s, Billy Riot and the Violent Fuckwits skewered punk nostalgists with their choral refrain: “You say you usta be a punk? Just fuck off and die” (2004). More recently, in November 2014, an event called “Fuck Nostalgia Fest” took place at the Warzone Centre on Little Victoria Street in Belfast (see Figure 2). The event’s Facebook page included, as a condition of entry, “NO GLASS/NO ASS-HOLES/NO POGO”—“pogo” referring to the quintessential dancing style of the early punk period (Fuck Nostalgia Fest 2014). At this event a comical piñata effigy of Terri Hooley, the former proprietor of Good Vibrations record shop and label, and “godfather of punk in Northern Ireland” (BBC 2015), was enthusiastically smashed to bits. The video footage had to be removed from YouTube after a furious backlash to both the violence of the act and the disrespect to a local punk icon, though Hooley himself seemed to see the funny side and attended a gig at the Warzone Centre a few weeks later. To be sure, Hooley’s legacy has been vaunted significantly in recent years, with a critically acclaimed feature film entitled *Good Vibrations* in 2012 (Barros D’Sa and Leyburn), and a related stage musical production at the Lyric Theatre in 2018 (Carberry and Patterson 2018).



Figure 2. Poster for “Fuck Nostalgia Fest” at the Warzone Centre, Belfast, November 14, 2014.

There is a great deal of tongue-in-cheek humor to this punk anti-nostalgia impulse, but it contains a salient point, and it is a distinct critique from the scholarly dismissal of “punk nostalgia.” Punk did not disappear just because the label executives lost interest, and it is certainly not the case that “the punk scene in Belfast collapsed back into sectarianism,” as McLoone erroneously asserts (2004, 36). Punks who had been exposed to the anarcho-punk movement by the likes of Crass, DIRT, and Poison Girls at the Anarchy Centre on Long Lane in 1981–1982 (a punk club organized by the Belfast Anarchist Collective—see Hyndman 2010), and who had been hanging out at the café at Just Books anarchist bookshop on Winetavern Street, went on to establish the Warzone Collective as an explicitly anti-sectarian countercultural alternative, first as a practice space above Belfast Unem-

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ployed Resource Centre on Donegall Street, before setting up their own venue nearby in 1986 (see Jardine and Chantler 2010). This anarchist-informed scene was more resolutely DIY than their predecessors, which explains why they are overlooked in the commercially focused punk histories, and they tackled their political and social situation far more directly and consciously than the early punks did. As interviewee⁵ “Ryan,” a founding member of the Warzone Collective, put it:

People came to Warzone who had come from loyalist backgrounds and republican backgrounds and we had this policy where *you didn't leave your politics at the door*, you brought it in and you discussed them, but in an open and amicable way. And a lot of people changed their viewpoints ... over time, they seen what was going on and what we were trying to do. They kind of thought “this is special.” (emphasis added)

The murderous violence of the Troubles has largely (though not completely) subsided since the 1998 Good Friday Agreement,⁶ but the core impetus of the Warzone Collective persists. Against the backdrop of continued segregation and increasingly sectarian social attitudes (most markedly among young people),⁷ with a Stormont Assembly (nonfunctioning since 2017) explicitly premised on sectarian division and opposition when it *is* in operation,⁸ and with the “border question” and the threat of renewed violence more prominent than at any time in the last twenty years as a result of “Brexit” (Beesley 2018; Hayward 2018), the punks living and breathing at the time of writing manifest an alternative culture of creative resistance, and they are explicitly critical of the post-conflict “peace.”

Punk Analyses of a Divided Society

As has been noted elsewhere (Rolston 2001; McLoone 2004), the punk bands of the late 1970s in Northern Ireland generally avoided singing about the Troubles, with the exception of Stiff Little Fingers (and their engagement with the conflict is somewhat qualified, since most of their conflict-related lyrics were written by an English journalist, and they anyway moved to London early in their career). This changed, in some respects, in the 1980s. Ruefrefx sang about the conflict from their particular background in the loyalist Greater Shankill area—they took an avowedly nonsectarian stance, but criticized American funders of the IRA in “The Wild Colonial Boy” (1985), sang about the IRA murder of eleven Protestants in 1976 in “On Kingsmill Road” (1987), and eulogized the 36th Ulster Division of the British Army, which fought in the First World War, in “The Fightin’ 36th” (2005).⁹ This direct engagement with the conflict was significant—while it may have carried some kudos elsewhere in the world, talking openly about the Troubles in Northern Ireland was (and remains) contentious, if not outright taboo, and in the case of Ruefrefx their political outspokenness actually made them unpopular in some circles—Elvis Costello called them “Orange bastards” (quoted in Burgess and Mulvenna 2015, xi) and they were “subject to sectarian abuse” at gigs at the Harp Bar (Mulvenna 2013).

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The anarcho-punk bands of the 1980s made direct reference to the conflict as well—for example, the Toxic Waste/Stalag 17 co-release (1985) focuses exclusively on the Troubles across the songs (titled “Traditionally Yours,” “Forgotten Victims,” “Burn Your Flags,” “Party Talk,” “Song For Britain”) and imagery (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Artwork from Toxic Waste and Stalag 17 (1985), *The Truth Will Be Heard*, Mortarhate Records. Front cover (left) features caricatures of prominent politicians in the crowd scene. Details from the lyric insert (center) show paramilitaries, British troops, RUC officers, and clergymen, with a barbed wire motif. The back cover (right) has an image of an army sniper, a child standing in front of a Saracen armored personnel carrier, and the Warzone Collective logo of a clenched fist with an anarchist circled-A inside a ring of barbed wire.

The anarchist punk scene of the 1980s and 1990s in Belfast also tackled the (expected) wider “anarcho-topics”¹⁰ of Cold War nuclear annihilation, animal liberation, religion, apartheid, and so on,¹¹ and the opposition to violence, war, militarism, and paramilitarism chimes with the “peace punk” of Crass and their anarcho-punk ilk, but this anarchist analysis of sectarianism is especially significant in the local context. In contrast to Ruefref or That Petrol Emotion (1987a, 1987b), who were coming at the issue from one or the other “side,” the anarchist punks wove their analysis of the Troubles into a wider (intersectional) critique of the state and oppression, and rejected the “two traditions” society of opposing sectarian identities, cultures, and backgrounds. Toxic Waste typify this anarchist analysis, as they boil the conflict down to a choice between competing oppressive elites, asking the listener, “Which set of leaders do you want? Choose and be damned,” in “Tug of War” (1986). Pink Turds in Space make a similar point in “No More Sectarian Shit” (1990c), highlighting the same power relations on either “side”: “When will you realise? Fighting the same war. This power and greed. It’s time you faced the facts.”

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Figure 4. *Pink Turds in Space* (1989), *Greatest Shits*, In Your Face Records. The politicians caricatured on the cover include David Trimble (top center), John Hume (top left), Gerry Adams (second from left on the bottom), and Ian Paisley (center), along with images of an army sniper, balaclava-clad paramilitary, and funeral scenes from either “side.”

Into the “post-Troubles” era, punk bands have continued to address themes of conflict (one mid-2000s band in Belfast even went as far as to name themselves *The Troubles* [“NI Punk” website]) and the anarchist critique has remained to the fore—for example, *Still Birth*’s 2009 track “Smash Both States” echoes the sentiment of *Toxic Waste*’s “Tug of War” in its rejection of both “sides” as oppressive. In the anthemic “Bollox to the RUC,” *Mr. Nipples & the Dangleberries* (2003)¹² apply the anarchistic (and punk) anti-police trope in the Northern Irish context:

SSRUC. Bollox to the RUC, sectarian majority ...

ignorance, brutality ... you have no authority ...

fuck your policing policy.

The “SSRUC” chant—linking the province’s then police force (the Royal Ulster Constabulary) with the Nazis—has long been a staple of street protests and confrontations with the police—Gilligan (2008) points to its use in street protests of the 1960s, while Weitzer (1987), in a bizarre effort to show that the police were becoming somehow less sectarian, highlights Protestant protestors using the SSRUC chant in the 1980s. It has also been deployed frequently in punk songs from Northern Ireland, such as *Rudi*’s “Cops” (1977), the *Defects* “Brutality” (1982), *Runnin’ Riot*’s “Judge, Jury & Executioner” (1998) and *Decoy 47*’s “Vision from Above” (2001), but *Mr. Nipples & the Dangleberries* explicitly incorporate it with a critique of the state: “fuck your policing policy.” Ridicule of political figures

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is another repeated trope—this is evident in the caricatures on the Toxic Waste/Stalag 17 co-release *The Truth Will Be Heard* (1985, see Figure 3); the caricatures on Pink Turds in Space, *Greatest Shits* (1989, see Figure 4); the cover of the Rejected Records compilation (Volume III, 2002), which parodies a Rev. William McCrea record cover (a unionist politician and religious conservative); and on the FTS (Fuck The Scene) records compilation of 2006 (Various Artists) (see Figure 5),¹³ which in a cut-and-paste fashion superimposes the heads of politicians onto a photograph of the Belfast ska-punk band the Hypocrites. The result is humorous, especially for those personally familiar with the members of the band, but the finger pointing in the image adds (at least a degree of) political critique as well. On a more serious tack, the punk-rooted ska band Aggressors BC tackle the perpetuation of sectarian attitudes in “29 Years” (2013) (the title is a reference to the duration of the Troubles):

I find some attitudes don’t change, no, hate still remains. Brooding beneath the surface, coursing throughout old veins. There’s no peace, there’s no trust, there’s no purpose. The cycle of blame starts again.

Ignorance come inherit our children. And it’s a new generation engrained. There goes another doomed generation.



Figure 5. Various Artists (2006), *Punk in Ireland 2006*, FTS Records. From left to right the superimposed heads belong to George W. Bush (US president), Gerry Adams (Sinn Féin), Ian Paisley (DUP), Tony Blair (British prime minister), and Bertie Ahern (Irish Taoiseach).

This analysis of sectarianism, from the street-level punk perspective (“For 29 years I have walked these streets”), echoes the pessimistic findings of research by Shirlow (2001), Nolan et al. (2014), the Commission for Victims and Survivors (2016), and Yiasouma

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(2016). An anarchist-informed analysis of the conflict also appears in the song—Aggressors BC sing “The working man’s just a pawn in the game,” pointing to a critique of the Troubles as cynical “politicking” by competing sectarian elites (“the game”), combined with a class analysis (though the gendered language of “working *man*” is limiting).

Anti-sectarian Punk

These various punk responses to the Troubles and its aftermath are rooted in anti-sectarianism—this goes beyond “nonsectarianism” to a wider rejection of the conditions and institutions that make sectarianism a persisting reality. As noted earlier, there has been a tendency to romanticize early punk in Northern Ireland in this regard, and in an effort to avoid repeating that narrative, this section will foreground an experience of sectarianism in the punk scene, as articulated by Liam:

There’s always been sectarianism in the scene ... A good way to explain I guess is that my best friend was from a Protestant background and I was from a Catholic background and we used to get like snidey ridiculous remarks about us being like “the peace process” or something, y’know like ... he’d have to dye his Mohican red and I’d have to dye mine green, really strange sort of like passive aggressive ... bullying from the older people. ... It wouldn’t be really openly sectarian remarks being made ... it was veiled in like this “huh huh, jokey jokey” way. The scene certainly wasn’t perfect then, and it’s certainly not perfect now as far as that. Sectarianism’s just like what’s happened—within Northern Ireland, even in the punk scene, it’s gonna take a lot of getting rid of. Primary socialization of people. We have separate schoolings, separate histories, basically separate educations, and then pushed together into a workforce while living in separate areas. So punk or not, it’s something that needs to be taken on.

This is a crucial point, and it goes hand-in-hand with Ryan’s point about “not leaving your politics at the door.” The process of “taking on” sectarianism within the punk scene should not be viewed as some kind of magic wand—as Liam points out, the punk scene and its participants in Northern Ireland are steeped in a sectarian and deeply divided society, and this needs to be continually renegotiated. But, without wanting to re-don the rose-tinted spectacles, the simple fact of people from either “side” socializing freely was *and is* hugely significant. Two interviewees involved in the punk scene and anarchist movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s point to this significance at the height of the Troubles:

Ryan: The police would stop a group of punks and ask their names, and they were really surprised to find like a Catholic amongst a group of Protestants, or vice-versa, to the extent that they asked “Have you been kidnapped?”

Adam: Nobody cares if you’re a prod [Protestant] or a taig [Catholic] ...there was definitely an anti-racist, anti-sectarian element to it. Which is something that real-

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ly can't be underestimated, particularly in Belfast in those days and the years previous to it. Y'know, alright, it's nothing short of amazing really.

Beyond the social mixing of people from both “sides,” anti-sectarianism is explicitly expressed in the punk scene in Belfast, not least in the standards of behavior expected within the Warzone Centre itself. The latest incarnation of the Centre, which ran from 2011 to 2018 on Little Victoria Street, had posters on the walls reading: “NO RACISM. NO SEXISM. NO HOMOPHOBIA. NO SECTARIANISM. NO ASSHOLES. NO EXCUSE” (see Donaghey, Woods, and The Warzone Collective 2019). Liam, one of the volunteers who helped run the Warzone Centre, reflected on the Collective's anti-sectarian policy:

Culturally, y'know, I don't think sectarianism really exists within the scene any more. I think there was like early stumbling blocks ... I guess the punk scene had a process of its own. ... As far as like hearing sectarian remarks, nowadays, it just doesn't happen within the scene, and if it does *it's met with the same hostility as a racist remark*. (emphasis added)

Interviewee Terry, another Warzone volunteer, echoed Liam's comments: “Our general consensus on ethics has to kinda shine through, not just anti-sectarianism but y'know just pro-equality.” For both Liam and Terry, anti-sectarianism is bound up with opposition to prejudice and oppression in a wider sense. An anonymous interviewee also gave a veiled comment on the likely repercussions of sectarian behavior in the Warzone Centre: “Try bein' sectarian in here. We're all lovely, but everybody has their buttons, like.” This non-toleration of sectarianism was illustrated in 2018 when an Austrian goregrind band called Vaginal Penetration of an Amelus with a Musty Carrot played at the Warzone Centre. As part of their mid-set “banter,” the band called out to the crowd: “OK, we want all the Protestants on the left, we want all the Catholics on the right—we wanna see you guys fight!” The entire crowd vacated within a few seconds and the band were left to finish their set to an empty room.¹⁴ Perhaps they were making a clumsy attempt at humor, or perhaps it was a genuine attempt to offend (as is a theme in goregrind generally), but the reaction of the *entire crowd* is telling.

As has already been suggested, this anti-sectarian stance is facilitated by an imagined “other” identity outside of the prescribed “two traditions”—as Francis Stewart puts it, this “rejection of the past ... then required [the] creation of something new” (2014a, 84). Seminal Belfast Oi! band Runnin' Riot celebrate this “other” punk identity in “Bold as Brass” (2009):

He defies the lot, walks the streets with pure impunity.
He's the underclass so you really can't knock him.
He's between the walls, pissing up no man's land.
Both sides just don't want him, cos he's got nothing to prove.

The gendered language here is not unproblematic (and this is an prominent aspect of Oi! in general), but the line “both sides just don't want him” is instructive—and this rejection

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echoes the anarchist rejection of the “two traditions” choice exemplified by the likes of Toxic Waste and Stalag 17 (1985) and Still Birth (2009), above.

An openness to “otherness” has been a defining feature of the Warzone Centre since its first incarnations in the 1980s. Ryan, a Warzone volunteer at that time, recalls that “it wasn’t just the Protestant/Catholic thing, but y’know more women coming into what had originally been a male punk scene ... it also kind of brought the city’s, for want of a better word, bohemians and weirdos and anybody who was kind of other or outside, it brought them in.” Nathan, a Warzone volunteer until 2017, identified this same openness, especially with regards to people from other places living in Belfast:

For a city that doesn’t have a large ... international community there’s an over-representation of people from abroad involved in anarchism in Belfast ... it’s providing an alternative kind of way of socially organizing in a city that has really staunch lines of social organization, that are incredibly fucked up ... If you’re from abroad and it’s not something that comes naturally to you, it’s really fucking scary for a lot of people I think. Whereas you can get involved with us and not need to know those social cues, like it is a real alternative to the way that people organize ... their social lives and their day-to-day lives in Belfast ... we provide a choice other than the traditional bifurcated society here.

So, again, this is not just a nonsectarian space where people from either side can mix or “integrate,” this is an *anti*-sectarian space populated by people who are rejecting the social norm of being part of one “side” or the other, and are, to at least some extent, performing an identity that is “other” to the “two traditions”—and, crucially, this is distinct to the nostalgic “community relations” reading of punk dismissed by McLoone (2004) and Finlay (2011).

However, this imagined “other” punk/anarchist identity is inevitably affected by the all-pervading “politics” of Irish/nationalism/republicanism versus British/unionism/loyalism, and the rejection of either “side” is qualified in complex ways according to individuals’ positions in a deeply divided society. Interviewee Adam, who is from a loyalist background, reflected on this historically:

People could get into punk and go along with ... [the] idea that socialist republicanism isn’t sectarian, it’s somehow apart from the sorta sectarian divide in our society ... The republican thing was still sort of anti-system, y’know, in a very immediate way then [1970s–1980s] ... whereas [laughs] loyalism most definitely wasn’t. It was blatantly reactionary.

Liam (from a nationalist/republican background) concurred with Adam’s assessment, reflecting on the late 1990s: “There was still like a weird, not active republican element, but ... it was a lot more acceptable to be from a republican background. ... So it was a little strange.” However, Liam noted that this situation “changed very quickly” in the early 2000s: “We had ... this huge turnover of people coming into the scene at that point ... it

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grew hugely. ... It was a strange progression that happened quickly—I think stuff starting getting politicized a lot more.”

Loyalist tropes of empire and militarism, and links between loyalist paramilitaries and English fascist groups such as the National Front or Combat 18 are, of course, extremely problematic from a punk/anarchist perspective, while the language of republicanism, and especially its socialist variants, has clear parallels (freedom, liberation, resisting oppression, anticolonialism, etc.). This unevenness of sympathies or potential alignments is seen further in the “Celtic punk” genre of bands such as the Pogues, Blood or Whiskey, Greenland Whalefishers, Flogging Molly, and the Dropkick Murphys, which combines Irish traditional music styles with punk, and features a plethora of Irish “rebel song” covers. There is not really a corollary British/unionist/loyalist “other side” to this combination of punk/anarchism and Irish cultural tradition.¹⁵ Burgess, of Ruefrefx, laments that “subversive popular culture ... remain[s] exclusively the unimpeachable birthright of the dispossessed, the revolutionary and the freedom fighter” (Burgess and Mulvenna 2015, xi). Through 2013 the Warzone Centre hosted a series of Irish culture/intercultural events titled “Craic House,” featuring Irish set dancing and traditional music, while the following year it hosted a Féile Unplugged event (in association with the republican-associated Féile An Phobal [Festival of the People]), and “An Gspota,” “an event that provides a space for Irish speakers” (Warzone Collective Facebook page), none of which seems to have caused any publicly expressed objection.¹⁶ These Irish music, dance, and language events held at Warzone during 2013 and 2014 are anomalous to the purported rejection of nationalist cultures associated with either “side”—notably, after some changes in the membership of the Warzone Collective, no similar events were held between 2015 and 2018. Because anarchist-informed punk relies on an imagined “other” identity in its rejection of either sectarian “side,” the complications of trying to synthesize an ethno-nationalist tradition with punk should be avoidable—but the crucial point is that explicitly Irish cultural events *were* hosted at the Warzone Centre (even if they smack as incongruous and were relatively short-lived), while even the notion of British or Orange cultural events being held in the space seems absurd. To flip the Good Friday Agreement’s “parity of esteem” principle on its head, the expected “parity of scorn” toward *both* the Irish and British ethno-national traditions from an anarchist-informed punk perspective does not play out so simply in practice.

While the anti-sectarianism of punk is defended here, especially against the dismissive views of those taking a naïve reading of punk in Northern Ireland, it is clearly not a simple or uniform process. Anti-sectarianism is renegotiated at the individual and (counter)cultural level on a day-to-day basis. It needs to be, because while the punk scene is marginal, it is still influenced by the wider sectarian/divided society. This ongoing renegotiation is also essential, because the dynamics of sectarianism are constantly shifting—the anti-sectarianism of the 1980s does not map onto the contemporary context. Because the Warzone Collective takes an anarchist approach, it can remain critical while not being constrained by dogmatism—this is especially evident in contemporary punk analysis of “the peace.”

Against the Neoliberal “Peace”

The ways that punk responded to the Troubles and the conflict in Northern Ireland, while diverse and often imperfect, have been shown to go beyond a “nonsectarian” approach, taking a critical “anti-sectarian” stance that is enabled by the ideal of an “other,” outsider punk identity, and informed by an anarchist critique. Arguably, punk responses to “the peace” illustrate the most thoroughgoing and interesting anarchist critiques—and this is an aspect that is completely ignored in most scholarly discussions of punk in Northern Ireland.



Figure 6. Poster from 1000 Drunken Nights (2009), Blank Cheque for Peace?, Carbomb Records.

The fold-out poster insert from 1000 Drunken Nights’ *Blank Cheque for Peace?* album (2009) is rich with vernacular conflict-related imagery (see Figure 6): the landmarks of Belfast city are shown in flames at the top; in the middle stand the hellish figures of Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams, the clergy with their “lies” and “holy shit,” the riot police and the flaming “meat wagons” (armored police vehicles) of the “SSRUC”/“SSPSNI,” balaclava-clad paramilitaries of both “sides,” “the hoods” emblazoned with the ubiquitous graffiti tags FTP, FTQ, KAT, KAH,¹⁷ a mountain of skulls; and beneath it all, the punks giving a middle-fingered “fuck you” gesture. The overall effect of this imagery resonates strongly with punk’s relationship to the conflict—the overarching bigotry, hatred, and corruption is rejected by the subclass punks. However, both the poster and the title of the album (*Blank Cheque for Peace?*) point to a further critique of the conflict, and especially of “the peace.” This is evident in the text on the police riot shield: “I PROTECT THE (BUSINESS) COMMUNITY” and in the oversized figures on either side, wearing “City” pin-striped suits and bowler hats with British and US flags on their sleeves, dangling a case of “BLOOD MONEY” above the grasping politicians. This fiercely critical and utterly contemporary critique stands in sharp distinction to assertions by the likes of punk historian

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Dee Wilson that the early punks of the 1970s “had our own organic peace process before the ‘other’ peace process even began. ... The politicians and the negotiators of the Good Friday Agreement *only picked up where we left off*” (quoted in McDonald 2017b; emphasis added). The *Blank Cheque for Peace?* poster demonstrates an anti-sectarianism that is opposed to both the institutionalized sectarianism heralded by the Good Friday Agreement and to the impetus of that “peace” settlement and its underlying capitalist/neoliberal “development” agenda. 1000 Drunken Nights pick up the “blank cheque” theme again in their 2015 track “Glass Tombstones”:

As the curtain falls on our “civil unrest” and American investors begin to infest.

Take a final look at the streets where yer from, 'cause none of it will matter when the NIO's [Northern Ireland Office] done.

A blank cheque for peace? Now that's just insanity. Glass and metal tombstones that reach for infinity.

Pacification of the red brick maze. Gentrification at a covert stage ...

The observation (or accusation) that “post-conflict” Belfast is now subject to “development” and “gentrification” (Murtagh 2008; McFall 2018) is in some ways prescient, with subsequent waves of eviction on North Street in 2017 as part of the Council’s “Belfast Agenda” that seriously disrupted numerous arts organizations (Scott 2017), the campaign in 2015–2016 to save the Sunflower Bar from being demolished to make way for student accommodation as part of the Ulster University Belfast campus development (Williamson 2015; Fitzmaurice 2016; Donaghey 2017a), the 2018 “Sunshine Not Skyscrapers” campaign in the Markets area (Fitzmaurice 2017; Erwin 2018; Human Rights NI 2018; *Irish News* 2018), and the very direct impact on the punk scene with the eviction of the Warzone Centre from Little Victoria Street in September 2018 and its subsequent demolition to make way for yet more student flats (Donaghey et al. 2019).



Figure 7. “Fuck Landlords. Eat the Cops.” Graffiti outside the Little Victoria Street Warzone Centre, September 2018.

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Interviewee Franky reflected on this process of gentrification, and Warzone’s eviction as a result:

Local buildings and local landmarks are being “regenerated”—they’re being flattened and replaced, and the social history’s being replaced as well. So what’s going on with Warzone and the building is just part of wider project in Belfast by outside investors to try and erase the social history of the “lower classes” in Belfast and replace it with a shiny new identity.



Figure 8. Detail from “Fuck Gentrification” T-shirt, produced on occasion of the last Warzone Fest at the Little Victoria Street Centre, August 24–26, 2018 (screenprinted by Grimmed Out at the Warzone Centre).

The Warzone Collective clearly situate themselves as victims of, and in opposition to, this wave of development—usually simply expressed as “Fuck Gentrification” (see Figure 8). Interviewee Adam saw that this closing down of physical space was accompanied by a closing off of “space” to express dissenting or critical views:

I actually think what we have now makes being anti-sectarian much more difficult. You’re allowed to be nonsectarian, as long as you don’t upset anybody, and as long as you don’t tread on anybody’s culture, because “everybody has the right to their own culture.” Even if their culture has the most awful reactionary fuckin’ bullshit involved in it, and fundamentally rests on one type of nationalism or the other. I feel now that *it was easier to be anti-sectarian when people were fucking shooting each other and bombs were goin’ off*. Not that I want to return to that. But I think a certain amount of space has been closed down. (emphasis added)

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“Peace” is mobilized to justify neoliberal development agendas in two ways. First, “underdevelopment” is blamed on the conflict and neoliberal policies are forwarded as a response to resuscitate the economy (not least in the “A Fresh Start” agreement of 2016, which, typifying the attempt to shroud neoliberalism in the language of “peace,” purports to “consolidate the peace, secure stability, enable progress and offer hope”; OFMDFM 2016; see also Preston 2018). Second, as Adam suggests, critical perspectives are dismissed as being insufficiently supportive of “the peace”—Adam even has to justify his response by asserting that he doesn’t actually want a return to conflict, as if that’s not completely obvious. As Tomlinson (2015) points out, the logic of waging a neoliberal “war on the poor” under the guise of safeguarding “peace” is perverse—1000 Drunken Nights point to this in “Glass Tombstones” (2015), with the lyric: “The bankers are privy to short term memory. It’s only yesterday that they called us bomb city!”

Despite the eviction of the Little Victoria Street center, Warzone volunteer Franky was adamant that the punk scene would continue to offer a critical alternative:

People in the collective almost feel a responsibility at this point in time with what’s goin’ on in Belfast to try and maintain some sort of indigenous sort of, y’know, whatever you wanna call it, street culture, working-class culture, punk culture, DIY culture, whatever slant you wanna put on it, I think a lot of us feel the responsibility in the city to keep it goin’.

To bring the chapter full circle, such a statement of resistance, deeply situated in the contemporary, with its assertion of creative, autonomous culture, stands in stark contrast to the co-opted and neutered punk mannequin in the Ulster Museum (Figure 1). The efforts to nostalgically historicize punk are as much a threat as the bulldozers, and the Warzone Collective resist both: “FUCK NOSTALGIA,” “FUCK GENTRIFICATION.”

Conclusion

The current dynamics of the conflict in Northern Ireland have been characterized as a “culture war” (McDaid et al. 2014; Wilson 2016; Meredith 2017; McDonald 2017a; Mitchell 2018)—it is less murderous, for now, but sectarianism is increasingly entrenched and reconciliation seems a distant prospect. The punk scene in Belfast is an alternative counter-voice in that culture war. With its focus on cultural production and creative resistance, it continues to provide an anti-sectarian space that is explicitly critical of the sectarian “peace” of the Good Friday Agreement and the neoliberal “peace” characterized by gentrification. In no way would the Warzone Collective wish to be held up as some kind of policy recommendation to the Stormont Assembly, but there are lessons to be drawn from this persisting countercultural critique, and the scholarship on punk in Northern Ireland is impoverished by its cataracted focus on punk as a distant historical moment and its ignorance of this contemporary manifestation of punk.

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the Warzone Collective members, past and present, and especially to the interviewees, some of whom were interviewed in 2013 as part of PhD research, others in 2018 as part of The Warzone Dialectogram Project (Donaghey et al. 2019). Thanks also to Robert Porter at Ulster University’s Centre for Media Studies for inviting me to speak at a seminar in November 2017 (Donaghey 2017b), research for which formed the basis of this chapter. Thanks to several reviewers for comments on earlier drafts.

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Lyrics permissions. All extended lyric quotations (“Bollox to the RUC,” “29 years,” “Bold as Brass,” Glass Tombstones’) used with permission of and approval by the bands concerned.

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“Ryan”—interview conducted October 8, 2013.

“Liam”—interview conducted October 6, 2013.

“Adam”—interview conducted August 28, 2013.

“Terry”—interview conducted August 10, 2018.

“Anonymous”—interview conducted c. August 2018.

“Nathan”—interview conducted October 6, 2013.

“Franky”—interview conducted June 15, 2018.

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Notes:

(1.) Ulster is the northernmost of Ireland’s four provinces. Northern Ireland consists of six of Ulster’s nine counties—the “micro-state” was created in 1921, remaining part of the United Kingdom after the Partition of Ireland.

(2.) Belfast vernacular for “used to.”

(3.) The plaque was commissioned by the “Alternative Ulster Historical Society”; the Ulster History Circle, which normally commissions the “official” blue plaques, said that while it commemorates music venues and musicians, “its constitutional remit did not extend to musical genres” (Foster 2018).

(4.) See also “A Riot of Our Own” symposium (2014).

(5.) All interviewees are anonymized. Interview details are provided as an addendum.

(6.) The death toll was almost 3,600 between 1969 and 1998 (McKittrick et al. 2001, 1552), with a further 158 conflict related deaths between April 1998 and April 2018 (Nolan 2018).

(7.) In 2001, research by Peter Shirlow revealed that sectarian attitudes were more pronounced than at any time during the Troubles, and were most pronounced among young people. Shirlow commented to the *Observer* newspaper at the time: “When the Good Friday Agreement was signed there was no policy agenda to change attitudes on the streets, which begs the question: did the politicians that signed it really want things changed or

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did they prefer to maintain these divisions?” (quoted in McDonald 2001). In 2016 the picture was no better. A report by the Commission for Victims and Survivors stated, “In Northern Ireland, segregation is part of life. Much of the population lives in communities which are predominantly made up of people perceived to be of one religious or community background” (2016, 15), and a 2014 report on the Flag Protests Dispute found that “[m]any children and teenagers in Northern Ireland have inherited a legacy of conflict that has negative influences upon their personal experiences and their socio-political views. Large scale studies of the attitudes of children and teenagers in Northern Ireland continue to show an awareness and wariness of community divisions” (Nolan et al. 2014, 89). A 2016 paper by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People pointed to “increasing recruitment to paramilitary organisations” among young people (Yiasouma 2016, 4).

(8.) The consociational mechanisms of the Stormont Assembly, such as appointing a First Minister and Deputy First Minister from either “side” of the national-ethno-religious divide, and especially the “petition of concern” veto (intended to prevent discriminatory legislation being passed by a dominant community at the expense of the other), mean that elected members entering the Assembly designate themselves as “nationalist” or “unionist,” institutionalizing sectarian societal divisions. The Green Party (environmentalist), Alliance Party (liberal) and People Before Profit Alliance (Trotskyist) all designate as “other” (a total of 11 Members of the Legislative Assembly out of 90 at the 2017 election). See Wilford 2014 and Schwartz 2015.

(9.) On the other “side,” That Petrol Emotion, not commonly identified as a punk band but formed by members of the Undertones, took up a political position from a republican background, most notably in “Big Decision” (1987a) criticizing the controversial “Diplock courts,” and in “Genius Move” (1987b) which was banned by the BBC because the cover artwork featured a reference to Gerry Adams (though, like Stiff Little Fingers, That Petrol Emotion had by this time relocated to London).

(10.) For example, nuclear annihilation: Bleeding Rectum, “Scorched Earth” (1993) and “Countdown” (on Various Artists 2002); Pink Turds in Space, “Really Depressing Song” (1989); Toxic Waste, “Fallout Children” (1983). Animal liberation: FUAL’s name was originally an acronym for “Fuck Up And Live” but was later reimagined as “Freedom Under Animal Liberation”—they sang about veganism, animal liberation, and anti-vivisection in many of their songs. Religion: Toxic Waste, “Religious Leader” (1987); Pink Turds in Space, “Christians” (1990b); FUAL, “Dead Clergymen” (1988). Apartheid: Pink Turds in Space, “Apartheid Kills” (1990a).

(11.) It is notable that, while the Belfast anarcho-punk scene featured women prominently, especially as vocalists (Toxic Waste, FUAL, Pink Turds in Space, Jobbykrust), feminism or women’s experiences were not a common lyrical focus compared with anarcho-punk bands in Britain (such as Poison Girls or Crass’s *Penis Envy* album [1981]).

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(12.) The song, originally written in the late 1990s, was finally released in 2003, two years after the RUC (Royal Ulster Constabulary) had been disbanded and replaced with the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland). However, the “SSRUC” chant is still used in confrontations with the police, as evidenced in a 2013 *Belfast Telegraph* report of someone being arrested for doing so.

(13.) Fuck The Scene Records (ca. mid-2000s) was based in Letterkenny, County Donegal, which, while being an Ulster county, is in the Republic of Ireland rather than Northern Ireland.

(14.) See The Warzone Dialectogram Project (Donaghey et al. 2019). On other occasions, bands have tried to take a position on the conflict without much understanding of the situation on the ground—for example, Brian Young from Rudi describes the Clash as talking “absolute shit” (in Sleazegrinder 2003, 103) and they were criticized for producing a T-shirt featuring a photo from their posed session in Belfast in 1977 (McLoone 2004, 37–38; see also Worley 2017, 235); Stza Crack, of New York crack-rocksteady band Leftöver Crack, playing at Auntie Annie’s on Dublin Road, Belfast, in 2009, launched into a bumbling speech in support of the “freedom fighters” of the IRA, which was not well received by anyone. Chumbawamba, who were more clued-in than most, were challenged by the Warzone Collective for their expressed support for the IRA at their gigs in England during the late 1980s, which was viewed as naïve. Chumbawamba argued that “they were trying to expose an English audience to what was going on by being confrontational about it” (Interviewee “Ryan”).

(15.) A punk band from the North Coast called Schiehallion (ca. late 2000s) did use bagpipes, nodding to an association with Scottish culture (but the name is Scots Gaelic rather than Ulster-Scots), and the anarchist folk-punk band Gulder (ca. late 2010s) took their name from the Ulster-Scots language word for “shout”—but this is far short of the full-hearted synthesis of “Celtic punk.”

(16.) This unevenness was also evident in the Belfast anarchist movement of the 1970s–1980s. Just Books stocked local publications that were in keeping with their broad political emphases, which meant they had to refuse some loyalist newsletters (but by no means all), while republican papers such *An Phoblacht* (published by Sinn Féin) could be stocked relatively unproblematically. The anarchist publication *Ainrail* (1985–1987) took its name from the Irish Gaelic translation of “Anarchy,” and referred to Northern Ireland as the “Six Counties,” suggesting an affinity with republicanism (see Irish Anarchist History website for the cover of issue 1, August 1985).

(17.) Meaning, respectively, Fuck The Pope, Fuck The Queen, Kill All Taigs (Catholics), Kill All Huns (Protestants).

Jim Donaghey

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