ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE ARTS

A READER

Edited by Gretchen Bakke and Marina Peterson

2017

Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
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CHAPTER 31
ON PUNK AND REPULSION, A MISFIT THEORY OF SOCIETY

Shane Greene

> Mommy, can I go out and kill tonight?
>
> The Misfits

It was 1983. I was twelve. I had just entered the insufferable *rite de passage* most people know as junior high. The false innocence of childhood was gone and the false promises of adulthood still years away.

In theory, I had what it took to fit in to the adolescent order. The mostly working class background didn't help. But growing up white, male, hetero with no particular disfigurement tends to get you places in America. (Many years later I have a PhD and tenure at a respectable university.) Despite some obvious signs of entitlement to the privileges of normalcy, during these formative young white man moments I proved unwilling to vie for a spot in the crowds of the sporty, the cool, and the popular. I was no more comfortable seeking admittance into the cliques marked by exclusion: the super nerds; the back roads rednecks from the rural parts of the county; the blacks from Bouchelle Street (they didn't all live on that street but the white kids acted like they did).

It was 1983. I was twelve. This was a tiny, ultra-conservative shit-town in the southern United States.

Luckily, Aaron Bachelder, my closest friend from elementary school, appeared with a solution, some sort of provocative proposition called "punk rock." In the early 1980s, in small town America at least, this was a thing so out of place as to be downright dangerous. We discovered this via threats of violence and frequent accusations that we were freaks, queer, mentally unstable, or all of the above.

Aaron's parents were a couple of kooky psychologists, professional-class transplants from the north. They supported it when both their sons, from very early ages, decided to pursue wildly impractical lives in music and art. By contrast, I was born a Tarheel and raised by strong women. My house was co-managed by a single mother, armed with the unlikely combination of a GED and some sort of organic feminist intolerance for masculine bullshit, and a jock sister who found her place in the world through basketball. Dad was a specter, off hanging out with his alcoholism and small-time drug dealers.

Despite these differences in daily realities, Aaron and I shared a pretty similar profile, sociologically speaking. When punk emerged in our lives we realized we had one very specific thing in common. It was the curious dilemma of "not fitting in," a narrative trope that emerges in every punk's origin story to one degree or another. In retrospect, the crucial point of convergence was that we apparently harbored some unique capacity to be really pissed off about it. We felt subjectively ready to declare ourselves total misfits to the world even though,

from a more objective point of view, our social profiles made clear we were just a couple of basic white boys.

Aaron heard the sounds and learned the look of punk from his older brother, Marshall. He had gone to North Carolina's School of the Arts and returned to unleash this peculiar subcultural phenomenon on an unsuspecting population of about 15,000. Aaron converted first, I converted second, and as far as anyone knows we were the first three punks to wander the small downtown streets of Morganton, North Carolina.

Within a month or two, I learned a crucial lesson about why this infamous subculture—full of "filth and fury," according to the headlines that launched the Sex Pistols into global scandal after a live interview on the Bill Grundy show in late '76 that went vulgar—appeals to the young and the placeless. By then, Aaron and I had finished the requisite shopping spree at the army surplus store in search of combat boots, trench coats and the like. One day I showed up at his house and sat watching him get ready for one of our routine street excursions with petty vandalism in mind: breaking into cars at used auto lots, busting into the junior high cafeteria to flip over the ice machine, punky stuff like that.

This particular day I remember focusing on Aaron's whole act of getting prepared for the public, putting on his punk outfit. It seemed more deliberate than when I did it. He told me to wait while he went to the bathroom to spike his Mohawk with some toxic-looking green gel. He came back and tossed me a fanzine his brother Marshall was producing. It had an article about nuclear winter, a phrase I'd never heard before but brought to mind that little triangular nuclear symbol I had seen at the downtown post office. Aaron looked in a wall mirror to adjust his skull-and-crossbones earring. Swirling his army green trench coat over his shoulder, he looked straight at me and declared: "OK, ready. Let's go out and offend somebody!"

On repulsion and structure (blah, yuck, ick)

Why does every human society anthropologists know about display such a strong tendency to divide the world into the normal and the abnormal, acceptable and unacceptable forms of behavior, the culturally taken for granted versus the totally taboo? Apparently, establishing norms is part of what makes us human. By now, we also know that the response to the fact of social norms goes well beyond simply accepting things as they are. Some feel excluded, others imposed upon. Some seek inclusion, others are desirous of transgression.

These are questions that have long perplexed scholars. Psychologists have a history of explaining normalcy in terms of individual behaviors, even when they relate that behavior to a familial context or developmental process. Other disciplines are more prone to address the issue from a more systemic point of view, using concepts like social deviance, cultural difference, or subculture. To name a couple of classic examples: Emile Durkheim taught us that all societies prescribe certain forms of social behavior and punish others considered threatening to the norm, although they do it in different ways. For him, this constituted a threat to the very moral fabric, or "collective conscience," that holds society together. Early anthropologists like Ruth Benedict emphasized the relativity of social behavior. A thought or action that is interpreted as disturbingly weird in one cultural context or historical moment might be considered utterly routine in another. So the range of possible explanations covers a lot of ground.

Many a social scientist has wondered if youth subcultures like punk are explainable in such terms. Maybe punk is related to the issue of problem families and interpersonal struggles with peers. Maybe it is the structural result of individual isolation produced by the dysfunctional elements of modern, industrialized society, a phenomenon Durkheim called "anomie." Maybe it is some form of neotribalism, producing small, dispersed, oppositional collectivities that might seem "natural" in native Amazonia but a little out of place in the mass urbanized contexts of New York, London, or Los Angeles.

Criticism of such approaches, at least those rooted in theories of race, gender/sex, or class, would suggest they are devoid of a more explicit focus on questions of hierarchy and power, specifically the ways that norms are also reflective of forms of social inclusion and exclusion. What others call the norm Karl Marx called "ideology," a dominant set of ideas and institutions associated with a particular economic order that justifies the exploitation of the marginalized. W. E. B. Dubois helps us think through racial thought, with its roots in the slave trade and European imperialism, as the structuring ideology through which whiteness becomes a standard against which nonwhite minorities are forced to measure themselves. Rooted more in philosophy and semiotics, De Beauvoir's classic feminist text identifies the multiple mechanisms that make gender-based exclusion a part of everyday reality, e.g. this is why "man" gets to stand in for all of humanity and "woman" only the second half of it.

Antonio Gramsci, writing during the reign of Italian fascism, renamed the Marxist concept of ideology "hegemony" and suggested people are not simply passive objects of ideological effects. Instead, they actively consent to the very ideas and institutions that serve to exclude them even while also using the ideological domain as a space in which to contest their exclusion. If I mention Gramsci, it is because in the 1970s a cluster of cultural studies scholars—people like Stuart Hall, John Clarke, Tony Jefferson, Dick Hebdige and others—began to think of hegemony as central to theorizing urban subcultural styles as counter-hegemonic projects that seek to express the systemic contradictions that surround social exclusion (see Hall and Jefferson 2006; Hebdige 1979).

Despite all these possible explanations, they still fall short of answering a question I find intriguing when it comes to punk. Why, historically speaking, has this subculture held so much appeal to young, white, middle-class, heterosexual men—those who otherwise might simply represent the privileged "normative" status in the US and UK where punk emerged?

I pose the question this way not out of an ignorance of the diversity of voices in punk, past and present, from the Bad Brains and The Slits to Tribe 8 and Bikini Kill. First off, there are some extremely generative accounts of punk that don't link it to any of today's recognizable identity categories or a specific class position. Instead they analyze it as a response to global capital and urbanization or as part of anarchist-inspired, direct-action oriented movements that cross class and geopolitical boundaries (see Nikpour 2012; Graeber 2009). Other accounts seek to decenter the white hetero punk dude from his presumptuous protagonism, demonstrating punk's multiple dialogues with everything from queer of color theory (N'yongo 2005) and chicana feminism (Habell-Pallan 2004) to gender politics (Leblanc 2009) and geo-political realities well beyond the US–UK rock nexus where most punk stories are still told (Greene 2016).

It is worth considering that the many minority experiences that constitute punk are also prone to articulate their stories as oppositional to the white hetero punk dude in part *because* they are perceived as exceptional within the subculture. For example, James Spooner, director

of the excellent 2003 documentary "Afro-Punk," explores the dilemma of double exclusion. The generalized racial exclusion of being black in the US is further compounded when afro-punks realize they constitute a particular exception within a subculture that is predominantly white. Similarly, Leblanc's 1999 book argues that young women's participation in punk is also experienced as one of frequent tension within a predominantly "boy" subculture.

In other words, whatever the "essence" of punk is (and clearly no one is going to concede to an essentializing account anyway) there is a widely held perception that punk is somehow "for" the normal white guys who have historically predominated in it, at least ideologically speaking. This explains both the classic accounts that say as much, like Hebdige (1979), as well as the contemporary accounts that seek to decenter punk's hetero-male-whiteness by demonstrating the diversity of perspectives that has been central since its start. The structural exclusions faced as a result of gender, sex, or race are made more complex with the decision to become actors within a subculture that cultivates the idea and practices of auto-exclusion and self-marginalization.

Notably, identity in the sense of gendered, sexed, and racialized subjectivities is not the only issue in play here. Early cultural studies accounts saw post-World War II youth subcultures primarily through the lens of class (e.g. Hall and Jefferson 2006). Despite popular urban myths that link punks directly to the proletariat, most of the more sociological accounts see punk in the US and the UK emerging as much or more from the alienated, amorphous sectors of the educated middle-class (see Frith 1980; Laing 1985; Lamy and Levin 1985).

Here, we might pause in order to recall an enlightening bit of dialogue from *Repo Man*, that beautiful classic of 1980s punk cinema. Otto, the suburban California punk protagonist who struggles to find himself amid the alienating effects of an oppressively mass-produced American society, leans over his friend Duke who is splayed out in front of generic cornflakes boxes. Bleeding to death, Duke looks up at Otto from the floor of a generic convenient store after a botched robbery where he was shot by the generic imbecile manning the generic cash register:

> Duke: I know a life of crime led me to this sorry fate. And yet, I blame society. Society made me what I am.
> Otto: That's bullshit. You're a white suburban punk, just like me.
> Duke: But it still hurts.
> [Duke spits up blood and dies. Otto runs away.]

Let's consider the possibility that Otto and Duke are on to something here. Through their torturous white, suburban, male exchange, they suggest that whatever else it is, punk is also about a particular reaction to the experience of being forced to represent a social norm (role, expectation, etc.) while feeling distinctly "out of step" with it (to cite Minor Threat).

From Duke's vantage point, it seems legitimate to blame society for the consequences it imposes on the individuals that are never fully in control of the position they occupy within it. From Otto's stance, this sounds like bullshit coming from a normal white guy and the most they can do is try to run away from the inevitable fate of being white, suburban Californians. Their social knowledge, however laden with ironic contradictions and valley punk speak, is extraordinary. Society really is to blame for what it forces on us—and *Repo Man* is a punk critique of precisely that problem. We can try to run away from the normative impositions

that surround us—and we no doubt encounter a few successes here and there. But it proves well-nigh impossible to fully escape the particular position into which we've been slotted. Basically, I think Marx's famous dictum that "men make their own history but they do not make it as they please" is being rephrased in Duke's dying thought. No matter who you are society "still hurts" because it will never leave you the fuck alone.

If in the US and the UK there has always been a wealth of white, hetero, middle-class guys attracted to punk—creating the perception that punk is *for* them even though it was never made exclusively *by* them—perhaps it has something to do with the structural position they occupy at society's ideological center. We might consider the possibility that this privileged subject does more than systematically reap the various material and symbolic benefits of being at the center of the normal. They (or "we," since I should include myself) of course do. But we might also think about how this ultra-normative subject also experiences the structural expectations of his normalcy as repressive in its own way, difficult or impossible to live up to, or maybe just kind of gross in its monotony and limitations. I guess what I'm saying, based in part on personal experience, is that punks are reacting, rather negatively, to the very idea of being socially condemned to represent the norm in the first place. They are looking for ways to remove themselves from that symbolic center, searching for a means to propel themselves out towards the margins, into the domain of the excluded and antinormal. This occurs amid structural constraints perhaps but they represent hopes to get beyond the normal nonetheless.

We might make more complex the basic dilemma of social inclusion and exclusion—and most analyses of class, race, and gender/sex ultimately hinge on this basic dichotomy no matter how much complexity they otherwise display—by relating it to a notion of structural repulsion. Unlike those who find comfort in being included in the socially normal, finding their place within social structures, punks are the ones trying to resist its power and privileges by pointing out its impositions and expectations. Overcome with feelings of repulsion to the norm, specifically the expectation they must be included in it, they seek instead to become repulsive to it. This is what my friend Aaron meant when he said, "Let's go out and offend somebody."

At one level, this proves problematic given the impossibility of ever fully shedding society's normative imperatives—and especially things as systemically privileging in modern Western societies as whiteness, masculinity, heteronormativity, and middle-classness. Yet, the punk who tries is at least theoretically open to the possibility of constructing non-normative dialogues, however much those dialogues are likely to proceed "without guarantees" (to invoke Stuart Hall's nondeterminism). Those seeking to remove themselves from the normative center and find a place at the margins are certainly more likely to engage in dialogue with those experiencing diverse forms of structural marginalization, at least more so than those embracing a normative status with much less critical awareness.

Importantly, the very possibility of non-normative dialogues taking place is also related to other modalities of social repulsion being experienced by those experiencing systemic exclusion along other social axes. Those occupying positions within social groups marked by historical exclusion, whether via racialization, gender/sex status, or class formation, are hardly without their own social norms, roles, and expectations to conform to and feel repulsed by. In fact, some of the best examples of work that explores punk from the standpoint of racialized or gendered experiences are implicitly exploring a kind of repulsion internal to

the marginalized position from which the subjects hail. To return to the example of James Spooner's documentary *Afro-Punk,* he does more than detail the complex problems around being black among a majority of white punks in the US. The film also directly explores the experiences of African-American punks that articulate feelings of repulsion at the many normative expectations that surround blackness, the norms that dictate how one is supposed to be black. By embracing punk, they self-consciously invest in becoming "oddly black" since punk continues to be seen as a subculture "for" white people (in the same way that, for example, hip hop is perceived as "for" black people).

Similarly, while there is a long tradition of punk feminist pioneers dating back to the 1970s, the likes of Siouxsie Sioux, Patti Smith, and The Slits, it was clearly the 1990s Riot Grrrl phenomena that most forcefully brought gender/sex and punk into critical dialogue. The Riot Grrrl mantra of "girls to the front"—both front stage as performers and to the front of the stage as active audience members—was more than a feminist indictment of the relative marginality of women in punk rock culture. It was also an explicit statement about how young women feel repulsed by the ideas and practices surrounding normative femininity. By becoming punks they were repulsed by the idea of becoming "typical girls" (to recall The Slits' early punk feminist anthem) and overtly choosing to use punk as the main method for becoming riotous women.

In short, it is in the space of these multiple, intricately overlapping, forms of social repulsion to the imperatives of accepting one's relatively defined norm that punk is made. Punks are the ones trying to remake themselves into something that is not just different, but repulsively distinct, from what society is already making out of them.

On repulsion and agency (buying in, opting out, selling out)

I find it more convincing to ground a theory of punk provocation in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin—and what better thinker could there be than one whose doctoral dissertation was rejected because it offended the reigning orthodoxy of the Russian academy of the World War II period. Eventually published as *Rabeleis and his World,* Bakhtin's (1968) text examines the work of a French Renaissance writer, exploring the link between medieval carnival and a nonconventional literary trope he identifies as grotesque realism. He describes the collective sociality of carnival in terms of a "suspension of all hierarchical precedence" (ibid.: 10), contrasted to the reinforcement of rank and social position encountered in official feasts and ceremonies. For Bakhtin this was a clear indication of the essentially anarchist tendencies of carnival. It also represented the creation of a lived space in which more spontaneous human interaction and forms of communication, liberated from the "norms of etiquette and decency" (ibid.) associated with normative social spaces, occurred. Similarly, grotesque forms of expression serve to celebrate the basest and vulgar forms of embodied experience symbolically degrading all that is associated with "high" culture and the higher human functions of abstraction.

In this sense both the sociality of carnival and the symbolic expressions of grotesqueness are provocative in the same way the punk underground is. They provoke through acts of transgression that challenge the assumed boundaries of the normative social order. The literal and figurative spaces associated with the punk underground serve to create a carnivalesque form

of experience, representing a separation from the mainstream and a temporary suspension of the hierarchal forms of sociality associated with it.

This is clearest in terms of the crucial distinction Bakhtin makes between carnival and spectacle. The former is a collective event in which there is no distinction between actor and spectator while the latter enforces and relies on precisely that hierarchical distinction. Blurring the distinction between performer and audience has always been central to the punk ethos. The explicit attempt to promote simplicity in the music—the classical punk song is approximately two minutes with three or four power chords—relies on the idea that no real expertise is necessary to become a performer. The design of punk fanzines as an integral part of the subculture, circulating at multiple levels from the local to the national and international, promotes a similar idea that no one need have any credentials to become a writer or artist. Finally, the true measure of an exciting punk show is the degree to which the line between "audience" and "performer" is literally erased during the "performance." That erasure happens in both directions. The audience members become part of the show by repeatedly occupying the stage, by stage-diving, by engaging physically with the performers (i.e. grabbing the mic from the singer, etc.). The musicians (with the obvious exception of the drummer) often end up diving into or surfing on top of the audience while still performing. By contrast a boring punk show is one in which the audience stands back from the stage, hands crossed, acting the part of passive observers.

Similarly, the punk embrace of the obscene and the profane in its modes of expression are clearly grotesque. Punk lyrics are notoriously more transgressive than most forms of normative communication. The Circle Jerks elucidate this in a song called "Bad Words" that intentionally includes no profanity. The broader point is thus that profane language is crucial to a liberating sense of personal expression and an antiauthoritarian stance ("Use them when you're sad / Use them when you're mad / Use them when you're happy / Use them on your dad"). The look associated with punk is also expressively grotesque. One of the defining features of grotesque bodies according to Bakhtin is their openness, the symbolic celebration of those parts of the body that connote a material connection to the body's earthiness. Here the use of spikes, chains, bondage attire, piercings, iridescent make-up, and ripped clothing used as primary forms to adorn the punk body do more than simply offend normative sensibilities of dress and attractiveness. They often explicitly highlight precisely those parts of the body that facilitate a sensorial interpenetration with the world and other bodies: mouths, tongues, noses, eyes, genitalia.

One might object to the use of Bakhtin on the grounds that the forms of sociality and modes of expression he identifies are heavily rooted in a notion of communalistic folk culture and humor whereas punk is heavily associated with a primarily urban and angry kind of individualism. However, due to its ability to allow for multiple, often contradictory, extremes punk has never been devoid of communal, folk, or humoristic elements. The communalism of punk is immediately apparent in the urban tribalism associated with it. The primary forms of bodily movement associated with punk, while anarchical and individualistic in some respects, also contain inherently communal dimensions. Punk dances, initiating as the pogo and then evolving into the slamdance or mosh, eschew any sort of choreography, require no practice nor partners, enforce no explicit gender division in terms of leading or following, and naturally generate circles (a core circle of those moshing and an outer circle of those pushing the moshers back into the pit).

While punk is most often thought of as an essentially urban electrified genre, folk accents and acoustic instrumentation have long been part of the subculture (with seminal figures like The Pogues in the UK and the Violent Femmes in the US). Similarly, while punk is full of angry autobiography and scathing social commentary it has always retained a space for the use of comedy. Ironic and satirical forms of provocation are an essential part of this. The intent to humor is clear even from hyper-politicized bands like the Dead Kennedys with song titles like "Kill the Poor," "Holiday in Cambodia," or deliberately spoofed cover songs like "Rawhide." But there are also those various punk bands with a largely jovial rather than bitterly punk profile: The Dickies, The Dead Milkmen, The Minutemen. Again, this reinforces the earlier point about punk extremities. Just because punks are mostly urban cosmopolitans this doesn't mean they aren't also a bit folksy. Just because punks often seem angry this doesn't mean that they don't love to make people laugh.

A final point worth considering is this. Bakhtin sees carnival and the grotesque as utopian spaces in which to imagine and even temporarily inhabit a different world where social relations are more egalitarian and freer forms of communication are permitted. Yet it is in the end a utopia, a space that represents a suspension of the normative order but doesn't engage in a direct confrontation with it.

Historically, punk modes of provocation share essentially this same quality. Punk seeks to provoke, shock, and offend power—typically in the form of the state and other moral authorities that defend the status quo. Rarely has it become a method to systematically confront, physically challenge, or displace that power. This fact means that punk, while potentially deeply offensive to power, is ultimately not that threatening to it. This fact also means punk is all the more likely to be absorbed by those commercial interests in the culture industry that seek constantly to tame what was once provocative and transform it into that which is now acceptable to mass consumption.

Following the repulsive impulse to provoke if not effect an actual disruption in the status quo—some sort of active symbolic-material critique intended to reveal the repulsiveness of social norms—is what punks mean by opting out. The punk agent therefore sees things set up into blocs of social actors whose individual decisions can be defined in these terms and in response to—yep, you guessed it—"the system."

If we take Graeber's (2001) basic explanation of value, opting out of "the system" represents the particular form of social action that punks find most meaningful, that which they most value. As an action with the intended effect of undermining normative logics, opting out is also at regular risk of being undone. "The system" by its very nature is a really powerful structural force. As opt-outs, the punks are in constant danger of becoming sell-outs since the action that they most value is pretty systematically not valued by "the system."

How exactly does one know when a punk is really opting out as opposed to just pretending to do so? It makes perfect sense that if the action of opting out represents the maximal punk value there might be some interpretative dispute over who is really doing it versus who is not, or who is doing it more punkishly and who less. This means we probably need to confront the perennial problem presented by the poser.

The term "poser" is pervasive in punk discourse, used essentially to describe an actor that is involved in what others perceive as an inauthentic performance. This less than subtle statement that punk subculture is also inhabited by "fake" actors—those whose actions are perceived as mere poses—relies on the implicit assumption that performances of punkness

can be both genuine and spurious. So, punks also clearly place a high value on authenticity, like it or not.

Crucially, the poser is sort of like a trickster figure or at least the formula for detecting inauthentic poses is not a simple, unidimensional one. A poser can be someone who performs punkness too little and someone who performs punkness too much. Either way, the risk has to do with an actor's performance of punkness being interpreted as an inauthentic version of opting out, a less than genuine expression of social repulsion. For example, I'm a white man professor at a large university with a steady middle class paycheck. With the velvet handcuffs of tenure, I write about punk rock and sometimes do so with a punk voice and in recognizable punk forums (e.g. 'zines like *Maximum Rock n Roll* or via DIY style, self-published texts). Punk is obviously not a forbidden topic in academe, post the invention of interdisciplines like Cultural Studies that propose to take popular culture "seriously." But I have discovered that writing with an antischolarly voice or in antiinstitutional forums has a net value of zero when judged by the stodgy, aristocratic standards of academe where the logics of symbolic prestige, seniority status, and peer review predominate (roughly in that order). If I haven't actually been called a poser to my face yet, I'm pretty certain that the occasional questioning of whether my position as an institutionally secure academic allows me to "be punk" amounts to the same thing.

By more than a slight contrast, GG Allin was a punk performer from the 1980s and early 1990s. He never made any money with his unabashedly poor-quality music or bottom-feeding "hits" like "Bite it You Scum." He had a notorious tendency to prance around naked, eat his own shit on stage, and provoke spontaneous violence at shows that rarely had more than a few dozen people in attendance. In 1993 he died of a heroin overdose to the disappointment of those fans that wanted him to make good on his many public promises to commit suicide on stage. Some punks consider him to represent the pinnacle of the punk value of opting out and refusing to buy back in. Others think he was a total clown precisely because of the extremities that his punk performance entailed.

Perhaps there is some sort of trick to not becoming this trickster figure that punks know as the poser. I think it has something to do with gaining an awareness of the fact that punk can never actually be just a random assortment of individuals, brought together by desires for opting out of the repulsively normative social structures they are subjected to. Those individual actions are necessarily structured in significant ways by the various systemic forces—not just race, class, and gender/sex, but also the particular historical moment and cultural context—that shape all of social life. In short, punk as a collective phenomenon is also a social world complete with its own rules and norms, roles and positions, internal status quo, and internal sense of repulsion toward it. It generates its own set of ideologically constructed values that revolve, however ironically, around the very idea of antinormativity.

The "culture" in "subculture" tells us as much. However open and oppositional it can be at times, punk is hardly a completely "free" space devoid of its own structuring principles and scripted actions. This can be appreciated by taking a look at urbandictionary.com's top definition for the street phrase "punk as fuck" which is meant to indicate a maximal level of punkness. I quote in full:

> Not giving a fuck.
> Not giving a fuck if you are punk or not.
> Not fucking caring what other people think.

Not giving a damn if you look punk or not.
Knowing that punk is an attitude ... not how you dress or do your hair, not what kind of music you listen to, not who you hang out with, not how much you drink, not what kind of drugs you do, not if you sleep on the street or eat out of dumpsters, not how many tattoos or piercings you have.
IT'S A FUCKING ATTITUDE.

Contained in this 'punk as fuck' attitude there is not just a casual comment about maximal punk action but the ideological concept of meta-punkness. To act punk, you have to know how and when not to underdo it and how and when not to overdo it. Counter to what one might think from the definition here, "not fucking caring what other people think" actually implicitly requires a distinct level of social awareness that others are in fact constantly thinking about you: that one is always a part of society even, and maybe especially, when intentionally trying to stand against it because of just how dang repulsive it can be.

The antisociality of punk is itself a social fact.

Conclusion

In case it's not obvious, I went on to occupy a basically normative slot it seemed I was hell bent on rejecting. My situation isn't exactly that of the Wall Street financier, but then again the super elite aren't really that normative are they? As professor guy, I clearly have no convincing claims to marginality, only a series of privileges that derive at least in part from the normative white-boyness I was originally repulsed by. It's entirely possible I was just a sell-out in the making all along; or perhaps this punk rock professor thing is just a pose. Whatever the case, I confess to feeling frequently at odds with much that gets presented as what I'm supposed to do or what I'm supposed to say or how I'm supposed to say it or what I'm supposed to think. It's tiring at times, exciting at others.

I have no idea what ultimately became of Aaron. Last I heard, he was living in North Carolina, teaching music, and had a family. Over the years, I actually became closer with his brother Marshall, the "original" punk of Morganton, North Carolina. His path seems like the least conventional of the three in many respects. We became closer friends when I ended up going to university in the same college town where he opened his first tattoo shop. Since then, he bounced around from one tattoo place to the next until finally ending up back in Morganton, living at home with his parents, and working at a local coffee shop. Turned a bit conspiracy theorist, he likes to refer to the internet as "Satan's web" (as in doesn't use it) and he does these really intense paintings that consist of dozens of layers of paint on top of dozens of other layers of more paint with no real discernable form.

Last time I saw him was several years ago but it was a moment of re-convergence. Covered essentially head to toe in body art for years now, he had sworn off tattoos entirely and claims the ink being used in most tattoos shops is a poison that infects the person with cancerous agents. We talked for a long time as if the years that separated our last conversation hadn't really occurred. It had the effect of making me wonder how we ended up in such different situations, still secretly bonded by a history of punk and now this other intimate knowledge that he was the one who gave me my first, apparently cancerous, tattoos.

Maybe there's an infinite reservoir of repulsiveness out there that remains, ready to be acted on, even as social life and the life of the social continue to define things. Rock on, I guess.

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