

# Mediations

Journal of the Marxist Literary Group



Volume 25, Number 1, Fall 2010 • **Marx, Politics... and Punk**

## **What Kind of Revolution Do You Want? Punk, the Contemporary Left, and Singularity**

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### **Introduction: Aestheticization of the Political**

When Leftist progressive programs work in the paradigm of the post-ideological politics of identity, that is to say, when the goal for radical political intervention becomes not to change political systems, but to achieve an epistemological revolution concerning the value of self-realization, it becomes similar to the punk movement that originally started as a movement in popular music. This is the thesis I would like to argue in this paper. Or, more precisely, I would even like to argue that the punk movement should be seen as a latent model for the biopolitical program advocated by such thinkers as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. We therefore can and should learn from the punk movement the structural limits of the program advocated by them.

The main theoretical framework in this argument is the notion of singularity, which, as I will demonstrate, functions as the key concept both for the aesthetics of punk and for the revolution that Hardt and Negri advocate. The use of the notion, on the one hand, makes Hardt and Negri's program assume the form of an epistemological revolution: that is to say, in their conception of revolution, the most important thing is in essence not to change the existing social and cultural institutions in the real world, but to change in the first place our understanding of the world and subjectivity. On the other hand, the implicit commitment to singularity in the aesthetics of punk, which, I will argue, is at the same time to be seen as the end of aesthetics, makes it necessary for the musical movement to function simultaneously as a political movement. The concept of singularity is generally understood to be a possible amendment to the limit of identity politics. Yet, when commitment to singularity leads to advocating an epistemological revolution, that commitment implicitly encourages a certain kind of quietism: if a revolution in changing how we see the world is sufficient, then of course we do not have to go to the trouble of trying to change the world in reality. If liberation or production of singularity is the fundamental model of revolution the contemporary

Left imagines, it is already enacted in the punk movement. In the comparison between the movement in popular music and the trend in the Left imagination, I would like to see the changes in the definitions of the political and the aesthetic in relation to the meaning of identity and singularity in our present.

If one aspect of the meaning of the punk movement lies in its shock effect, and if the primary impact can be epitomized by the debut of the Sex Pistols, their first single, "Anarchy in the UK," certainly indicates that the song's political nature must be one of the most shocking elements of the band: the song starts with the declaration that the singer is "an anarchist" as well as "an antichrist." Of course, the band did not stop there, and went on to release "God Save the Queen." (The Clash's debut single was also the political "White Riot," and there is now a "list of political punk songs" in Wikipedia, which enumerates more than a hundred such songs.)

This of course is what happened in the lyrics of popular songs. Now everybody knows that Johnny Rotten is a punk rather than an anarchist. His declaration produced an impressive shock, probably intentionally, on those who first experienced punk, but the band, as well as Rotten, did not propose any political plan to develop an anarchist cause. In other words, it might be reasonable to think that, in the lyrics, "anarchist" means not someone who is committed to a political cause, but one who simply says "No" to any political plan. The starting point of my argument is that it would be a misunderstanding to think that the latter is politically more radical than the former.

The band's attitude is of course commonly perceived as being just nasty, bad-mannered, and anti-social, rather than political. They became notorious when "swearing at Bill Grundy on live primetime television," to quote from John Davies's essay, "brought them to the attention of the tabloids, the *Daily Telegraph's* editorial writer, and, it seemed, the whole country."<sup>1</sup> And Davies thus defines the status of the band in the context of the UK punk movement:

[I]t is the Sex Pistols who have deservedly held punk's centre stage. Since 1976, they have been regarded as the quintessential punk group. If not actually the first to release a single and an L.P. (these titles are claimed by the Damned), the Sex Pistols were the first to proclaim "the end of rock 'n' roll" and the first to self-destruct when they were about to become just another rock 'n' roll band.<sup>2</sup>

In their original career up to 1978, the Pistols continued emphatically to transgress the accepted social norm and to betray the expectations of those involved with them. Or, more correctly, the original history of the band as reported underlines the transgression and the betrayal. The question here is how we should understand the political meaning of the transgression and the betrayal found in the legend, if not the real history, of this legendary punk band that was understood as behaving anti-socially, declaring the end of rock, and acting self-destructively.

Listening to another of the Pistols' songs, "E.M.I," which ridicules the record company that was disgusted enough to terminate its contract with them, their critique could be interpreted as aimed at the oppression imposed by control society: hypocritical corporate capitalism's suppression of the band's artistic freedom. The critique grows more salient when it is put into the context of the punk movement in general. (The Clash has a well-known song on the theme, "Complete Control," and even in "White Riot" there is criticism of school.) Furthermore, the critique is seen as part of the DIY, or "do it yourself," philosophy that is generally considered to mark the nature of the true punk. With a philosophy warning punk bands of the danger of "selling out" to major record labels instead of committing to independent ones, the Pistols (although they, along with Malcolm McLaren, did get contracts with major labels) demonstrated that they were ultimately unable to "sell out," as they were never happy with major labels.

The Sex Pistols performed apparently political songs that produced effects in their scandalism or anti-social attitudes. But primarily the political topics they mention had an aesthetic or, simply, shock effect that made the songs conspicuous, ear-catching, and popular: the political side had a certain kind of aesthetic value here, although this does not necessarily mean that the songs have no political value. In what political context, then, should we put such aestheticization of the political, where the aestheticization works not in order to conceal and justify the controlling of society, as Walter Benjamin once stated, but rather, apparently, to criticize control society? In considering the aesthetics of punk as epitomized by the Sex Pistols, we are not concerned with how to depict the political value of a certain genre of pop or rock music (as we all know and exercise the kind of analysis that sees a political dimension in what appears as aesthetic), but with how to depict the way in which what appears as the cultural exploits the political. Naturally, this is about how a configuration of discourse defines the truly political in our age, in which the political seems to have its foundation in cultural politics.

### **Anti-Aesthetic of Singularity**

Not a few contemporary thinkers claim the value of the commitment to singularity in conceptualizing an alternative form of community that amends the limit of the identitarian formula whereby a community stands on a shared identity. If we regard identity as a technology of control along Foucauldian lines, the commitment is a critique of control society. One of the typical arguments is found in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*, where the resistance to Empire as the global regime of biopower is to be enacted by the alternative community of the multitude made up of singular subjects.

Basically, singularity means to conceive each and every human subject as an instance of an ultimate difference that cannot be reduced to sameness:

The multitude is composed of a set of singularities — and by singularity here we mean a social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different. The component parts of the people are indifferent in their unity; they become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people.<sup>3</sup>

So the commitment to singularity enables us to imagine a community where no minority is suppressed. Although this argument apparently follows Deleuze's ontology, where the essence of being is defined not as identity but as difference and, therefore, representation is seen as the subordination of differences to the identical (Deleuze and Guattari's influence on Hardt and Negri is obvious), the multitude of singularities in Hardt and Negri's argument is conceptualized not on an ontological but on a political level, as in their definition "Multitude is a class concept."<sup>4</sup> Most simply, the multitude here is their alternative to the concept of the proletariat, or the poor: it is "meant to repropose Marx's political project of class struggle" and is "based not so much on the current empirical existence of the class but rather on its conditions of possibility."<sup>5</sup> For Hardt and Negri, the multitude as an association of radically different subjects is a possible answer to the aporia of the "unity and plurality" of the working class.<sup>6</sup>

Concerning the unrepresentability of singularity, Kojin Karatani explains that the idea refers to what could be called the "thisness" of the subject.<sup>7</sup> It is because of the singularity of the subject that, as he demonstrates, one is not able to tell a mother who has lost her child that she could have another one: a child is seen as a singular subject since it is irreplaceable even when a mother has or will have more children. This means that, ultimately, a singular subject is irreplaceable even if there were to exist precisely the same human being, or even a clone, identical in every possible way. The singularity of a singular subject is thus defined as something that can only be named as the "thisness" of the subject: "thisness" as set in the beyond of representation. To conceive a singular subject is, therefore, to imagine a subject that defies any form of representation.

To put this the other way around, if you imagine an item that articulates the singularity of a subject, or a describable mark of singularity, you are not talking about singularity: you are still talking about identity. Philosophically speaking, you are able to imagine someone who shares the articulated marker, the describable item, and therefore to imagine a community whose members share the item, which yet might not fit the known categories of race, gender, or class. It is the logic of identity that is followed in the community since the community is made of the logic of the same, sharing an identical item. This in turn means that in such a conception, a community is always conceived within the logic of inclusion and exclusion.

So, to imagine a singular subject means to imagine a subject whose essence is utterly

unrepresentable, even though the “essence” can be defined as absolute difference. If, for Hardt and Negri, the conception of the multitude as a set of singularities means to open the possibilities of a new form of the proletariat, what they want is to regard the essence of the working class as unrepresentable in order to propose a new form of solidarity in the working class.

Hardt and Negri’s proposal does not seem to me a mere fancy because, as I believe, the aesthetics of punk, as epitomized by the Sex Pistols, is a demonstration of the aesthetics of singularity as expressed in reference to the predicament of the (British) working class.<sup>8</sup> What lies at the core of this aesthetics is the symptomatic performance of the unrepresentability of one’s identity that has turned into singularity: it is self-destructive as punk expression since it acts out the ultimate uselessness of every medium, including rock or pop music, for the expression of one’s truth. The tunes the band performs must be simple, short, and aggressive, for they are to express the essential inadequacy: even rock ’n’ roll is a nuisance, a pain in the arse, which could only be the second-best thing available. Sid Vicious became legendary by performing the paradox most clearly: he acted out on stage his inability to play the bass. The Pistols hate everything since they are frustrated; they are always frustrated since their essence is by nature unrepresentable. Since it is unrepresentable, punk expresses anxiety only in performativity, implying the impossibility of representing the truth. This is why the Pistols had to break their instruments, incite the audience, and even symbolically destroy the whole stage and their performance.

In fact, what the Pistols tried to express may be a concrete and specific frustration they felt in their specific experience in their own cultural context. Yet, I wish to argue, the Pistols are punks rather than anarchists; their “message” has a shock effect, that is, a meaninglessness that defies communication, rather than a communicative value that persuades the listener of how he or she is alienated. They are punks when their songs have aesthetic rather than political value: even when their songs fail to represent the actual and political predicament they have to live through, they certainly offer and demonstrate a new style of rock music. Their songs are disconnected from, or transcend, if you will, the specific political situation they live in. And when we admit this aesthetic dimension in the Pistols, what we see in them is the performance of the aesthetics of singularity, or aesthetics corresponding to the concept of subjectivity as the singular, rather than the political expression of any specific situation.

Yet, logically at least, the aesthetics of singularity involves the end of the aesthetic. If punk music demonstrates the radical expressionism of the singular subject, what is expressed there is the ultimate inadequacy of the medium they use as well as of any other possible medium: singularity is expressed only when one performs in such a way as to show that even the three-chord rock ’n’ roll they more or less love is ultimately useless. This is where punk signifies the end of rock ’n’ roll.

The punk movement thus concerns post-historicism. It is the invention of a “new” style that paradoxically tells us that there cannot be any new style that represents

the punks' singular truth, since singularity defies representation. The style tells the death of rock: it implicitly insists that the history of rock has reached its ultimate dead end with the invention of punk, where even rock 'n' roll appears as insufficient. It is the declaration of the post-history of rock in the sense that, while the history of rock music can be seen as a process of searching for a better beat or a better musical style that more adequately represents the performer's self, when punk music returns to the simplest form of three-chord rock 'n' roll, punk performers know from the beginning that there cannot be an adequate medium for their expression. Punk's aggressiveness is directed at its own medium of music in this sense: it is an empirical revolution that finds its own medium an obstacle rather than a true medium. When punk negates the possibility of rock music functioning as a medium of representation, every rock band before punk looks merely sophisticated and elitist.

This aesthetics at the end of history entails the changes in aesthetic values that we frequently encounter in talk about cultural politics. The end of the aesthetic involved in punk aesthetics follows the same logic as the critique of universalist aesthetics in the multiculturalist agenda. Put most simply, the style in punk is seen as a sign of the culture to which one belongs rather than as an aesthetic expression. The punk movement thus works to form an imagined community: when you play punk tunes or go to punk shows, you are a punk. To love punk music defines your identity, simply speaking. On the other hand, if you love a Beatles song and are smitten with Beatlemania, you are still who you are.

This entails the paradox that punk is and is not a style. One way to articulate this paradox is to speculate what "cover" means in the aesthetics of punk. A good example is Sid Vicious's great cover of "My Way," where the song's message really starts to sound punkish to the appreciative listener (although to "do it my way" suggests here to destroy the song, in stark contrast with Sinatra's version). Put schematically, this means that a punk can cover every possible song, while nobody can cover a punk song if one is not a punk. As Sid exemplified, a punk can sing any song in his own punkish way if he likes, whereas it is not possible to present the essence of a punk song in a covered and rearranged version. The point is not that if a punk song is covered in a different arrangement it is no longer punk (although that is true), but that, while we discover how beautiful a song of, say, Bob Dylan's really is when sung by, say, Peter, Paul and Mary, a true punk song does not have such an aesthetic essence to be exposed in a new arrangement. This does not mean that there is nothing beautiful in a punk tune, but that while it may have a beautiful melody line, that line cannot be the essence. Schematically, a punk tune is what is played by punks; when some other people perform it, it is a fake. In the sense that punks invented a new style of rock music, punk music is a style; yet at the same time it defies the notion of style insofar as punk's "style" defies the necessary condition of what an aesthetic style means: the style being the aesthetic essence that has universal applicability.

Another way of explicating the paradox is to consider the fact that we are not able

to tell, in principle, which song of the Pistols is better than others; all we can do is to tell which is most typical or exemplary. For, if there is a song better than others, the song must be well-written; if there is a song better-written than others, there must be a better technique of song-writing that can represent the truth of punk; and if there is a better technique, the band should start to develop from the technique, ceasing to be a punk band. On the other hand, even a band like the Rolling Stones, whose image as wild, surly, and more or less anti-social (at least in their earlier career), shows an aesthetic attitude crucially different from punks. When the Stones identify themselves as prophets of R&B, we are still able to apply the deep structure of aesthetics in order to appreciate the value of their songs. And, as another example, when Eric Clapton confesses his desire to be a black, the desire still clearly concerns the idea of aesthetic excellence: he does not want to be black just in order to be black; he wants to be so in order to play better or more authentic blues. The desire might be problematic, but the structure of the desire illustrates the aesthetic dimension, or confusion, in pop and rock music. Punk invents a style, but the essence of the style means a dead end. The aesthetics exemplified by the punk movement is significant because the aesthetics involves a logic that tells the end of aesthetics.

Punk music thus signifies an empty form of expressionism that is the logical conclusion of singular subjectivity. It has to be called empty because, ultimately, it has nothing specific to express except the impossibility of expression. This is where the aesthetic is understood only in terms of the anti-aesthetic: the aesthetic is a mirror of the politics of those who want to belong to the identities constituted around the aesthetics. It is commitment to singularity that necessarily only translates the aesthetic into the political.

### **The Political and the Biopolitical**

Yet, I believe, it is impossible to define “punk” as an essentially political movement. In *The Philosophy of Punk*, Craig O’Hara succeeded in illustrating what kind of political philosophy is involved in the punk movement.<sup>9</sup> When he argues that punk’s initial characteristic is its stress on “rebellion” (38) and taking on “responsibility” (39), that its ideology is roughly identical to anarchism, where its non-conformism involves anti-violence, pro-feminism, and eco-consciousness, and that its most distinguished political and ethical attitude is found in the faith in the DIY philosophy, where self-control and self-government are chosen over popular and commercial success, I do not disagree with him, although, as O’Hara himself admits, there could be other definitions of the punk movement. Even when the movement does involve such a philosophy, however, there is a problem with O’Hara’s argument: if commitment to the philosophy is the essence of the punk movement, then to play punk tunes, theoretically, turns out to be just an accessory to the philosophy. This might be O’Hara’s true point, but I believe that the essence of punk lies in the bands’ activities, tunes, records, and performances, rather than what philosophy the movement follows. What

I am trying to analyze is a cultural movement in the realm of pop and/or rock music, not a political movement of new anarchism that starts around the end of the 1970s in Europe and the United States.

What O'Hara unwittingly presupposes is the concept of punk as an identity: since you are a punk when you love punk tunes, what you do off stage is as meaningful as what you do on stage. That is to say, the reason he wrote the book on punk philosophy is that punk cannot be merely an aesthetic expressed in its songs. This clearly demonstrates that the category of aesthetics bankrupts itself with the re-definition of the new realm of the political when an aesthetic style is connected with the notion of identity, or "lifestyle," the term more often used in the case of the punk movement. With the end of the pure and ideology-free category of aesthetics, the aesthetic becomes the political, where all everyday activities eventually assume significant political values.

Analysis of the punk movement makes it clear that the changes in the definitions of the aesthetic and the political result from the concept of "rebellion" or a critique of control society; or, more precisely, the concept of "society" or "the establishment" as the technology of invisible control. Michel Foucault calls biopolitics a field of new political power that emerged in the nineteenth century in order to govern, regulate, and control populations.<sup>10</sup> According to him, biopolitics came into being as a new configuration of political power, different from the older notion of politics, when "population" was starting to be recognized as a new object of governance, something essentially different from an aggregation of people. Although what Foucault argues is a new form of controlling power and what I find in the punk movement is resistance to this (sometimes Hardt and Negri call the former biopower and the latter biopolitics), my point here is that the passage from the political to the biopolitical appears as the emergence of a new field that used to be regarded as outside of the political. The politics of identity as resistance to hegemony, as symbolized by the political dimension of the punk movement, should be understood in terms of biopolitics rather than politics. The punk movement is not a political movement per se, as far as it is conceptualized around the hub of punk music as music; yet it certainly involves a genuine biopolitical dimension — a new political dimension that is not thoroughly political in the older definition — when the music functions as a certain kind of marker of identity.

In fact, politics in culture has been central not only in the academic literature on popular music, but also in the wider range of cultural studies. Talking about rock music in general, Lawrence Grossberg, a well-known scholar of cultural studies, thus defines the "politics" of rock.<sup>11</sup> It essentially functions as "an affective machine" that "operates on the plane of affect and its primary effects are affective": that is to say, "It does not (or only rarely) challenge the major dimensions of American ideology; it is largely liberal and ameliorist."<sup>12</sup> The "affective machine," however, enacts "a politics of fun (where fun is not the same thing as pleasure, nor is it simply a historical experience)." The meaning of the "politics of fun" concerns the music's relation to its

supposed target of “youth”: “Youth itself is transformed from a matter of age into an ambiguous matter of attitude, defined by its rejection of boredom and its celebration of movement, change, energy; that is, fun. And this celebration is lived out in and inscribed upon the body — in dance, sex, drugs, fashion, style, and even the music itself.”<sup>13</sup>

The reason the “affective machine,” through the “politics of fun,” concerns only the limited audience of the young, however it might be transformed, is that rock is “a differentiating machine”: “It continually differentiates Us (those within the space of its logic) from Them (those outside the space of its logic).”<sup>14</sup> Grossberg furthermore argues: “The history of rock is marked by a continuous struggle over what is really authentic rock and which groups are really invested in it. To be clear here, I am not saying that there really is such a difference; rather it is an effect of rock’s differentiating work. . . . In this way, rock is continually restructuring itself as a field, reconstituting its ‘center.’”<sup>15</sup>

One thing that becomes clear here is that Grossberg points out what I argued to be the politics of identity involved in the punk movement as the fundamental characteristic of the politics of rock in general. Although I will have some points to make later about the degree to which rock music historically worked as a “differentiating machine,” it is also true that what I referred to as the characteristic of the punk aesthetic — the belief that every song can be covered by a punk, but no punk song can be covered by a non-punk — is to be found in other rock musicians and other kinds of rock music believed to belong to other subgenres. It is plausible, I certainly agree, that an enthusiastic fan of Led Zeppelin will believe that Zep can play anyone else’s song as if it were a genuine Zep song, while no musician except the members of the band could play any Zep song as a Zep song. And the same can be said of numerous groups. My point is that, if we regard the history of the original Sex Pistols as the paradigmatic example of the punk movement, the characteristic of what I called the aesthetics of punk can be seen as a series of coherent logical necessities of the commitment to singularity. In other words, I am trying to do a tentative mapping of the history of rock music in which what is exemplified by the Sex Pistols is a kind of logical apex of the belief in rock’s “progress.” It is only when one believes in the empty expressionism of the singular subject that one can say that the paradox in the notion of “cover” in punk is a theoretical requisite, which in fact seems to be believed by a comparatively larger audience and to be believed to be not a matter of a band, but the nature of the movement. On the other hand, if Led Zeppelin writes songs that are really fit to express its essence (as is probably believed by many of its fans), what the band covers can only be a good imitation of genuine songs of its own (in spite of what fans might believe listening to a cover). The empty form of expressionism is a theoretical realization of what Grossberg argues to be the politics of rock in general.

Grossberg concludes that “rock is a deterritorializing machine that defines a politics of everyday life.” Adopting the notion of “everyday life” from the situationist

Henri Lefebvre (which is, Grossberg notes, “a kind of disciplinization” in Foucault’s term and “a politics of territorialization” in Deleuze and Guattari’s terms), he observes that the politics of rock is “defined by its identification of the stability of everyday life with boredom” and then “draws or produces ‘lines of flight’ which transform the boredom of the repetition of everyday life into the energizing possibilities of fun.”<sup>16</sup> So, when he declares that “all rock can do is change the rhythms of everyday life,”<sup>17</sup> he means:

In this context it is important to begin by admitting the obvious and painful truth that rock rarely challenges the political and economic institutions of society (and when it does, it is usually either marginal, utopian, or hypocritical). It does not even challenge or attempt to negate the political and economic conditions of everyday life. It remains largely within the privileged space of everyday life, although it often imagines its romanticized other — its image of alienated rebellion, its black musical sources — as living outside everyday life.<sup>18</sup>

From this observation, we might understand why O’Hara tries to explicate the punk movement in terms of its “philosophy” rather than of its musical elements. It is possible to argue that while the punk movement emphasizes the aspect of a differentiating machine (you are a punk when you love punk), it at the same time reinforces its political aspect, making what you do as a punk off stage (the anarchist politics that agrees with feminism, ecology, alternative lifestyles) just as significant as what you do on stage.

Yet, as argued here, O’Hara’s latent project to define punk as a “political” movement is in vain, and Grossberg’s critique of the limit of the politics of rock fairly clearly demonstrates what it means to analyze a cultural movement in terms of the “political.” When Grossberg states that “rock rarely challenges the political and economic institutions of society,” his observation ignores the biopolitical effects that rock, and especially punk as a movement, entails. It might even be said that the limit Grossberg points out coincides with the borderline between the political and the biopolitical, for his definition of rock as an affective machine can be a critique of rock’s limit as long as one does not see the possibility of the affective effects forging the listeners’ identity, through which they start to act in order to change the world (about which O’Hara offers numerous examples). O’Hara’s argument essentially focuses on what can be called the performative effect of popular music, or the music’s power to change the listeners’ identity, in just the same way that Judith Butler argues that the norm of gender performatively defines one’s subjectivity, while Grossberg carefully remains suspicious of the power of the politics of fun, as the politics of the body, changing “everyday life into the energizing possibilities of fun.”

In fact, I would rather like to argue that what matters in the analysis of the

political effect of the punk movement are not the confusions or disagreements about empirical consequences that the punk movement brings about, but the differences in the paradigms, political or biopolitical, that one presupposes in the analysis. When Grossberg observes that “all rock can do is change the rhythms of everyday life,” rock is politically impotent for him, but to change the rhythms of everyday life is in fact everything that a biopolitical program could imagine. It certainly is difficult to bridge the political and biopolitical paradigms. For one thing, if it is the ultimate goal of biopolitics to forge one’s new identity by changing one’s rhythm of everyday life, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to tell whether the subsequent political action that the person with the new identity enacts is a subjective act or an effect of the music which one believes has changed one’s identity: in the paradigm of the older politics, it is subjective and the music is only a cue, but in the biopolitical paradigm it is in fact evidence that music can change the world. For another thing, and more essentially, the antinomy between the political and the biopolitical concerns the realm that politics should refer to. While something politically meaningful can be achieved only when it effects changes in the public realm, as is implied in Grossberg’s argument, the biopolitical by definition problematizes the definition and the segregation of the public and the private. If a political achievement means changes in the public organizations that govern the shape and the formation of the private, the biopolitical viewpoint insists that that is setting the cart before the horse, as is exemplified by “the personal is political,” the well-known slogan of feminism as one of the earliest (bio-) political programs focusing on the value of identity. In the paradigm of biopolitics, the private, and how the realm of the private is defined, should be the ultimate target of the political program. Hence it is the greatest biopolitical achievement if the rhythm of everyday life can be altered.

As long ago as 1979, in one of the earliest monographs on the punk movement, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige analyzed it in terms of lifestyle, or identity, pointing out punk’s relation to the subculture of the black minority in England and its music, reggae.<sup>19</sup> In its general theorization of “subculture” in cultural studies, *Resistance through Rituals* argues that, being “highly ritualized and stylized,” subcultures only offer “a resolution which, because pitched largely at the symbolic level, was fated to fail.”<sup>20</sup> This observation returns us to the problem of biopolitics. The problem involves Grossberg’s critique of identity politics in rock formation: the postulation of its “romanticized other” as “living outside everyday life.”

### **Self-Marginalization**

In this part, I would like first to clarify the confusion in my argument concerning singularity and identity. I defined the aesthetics of punk as one of singularity, and the biopolitics involved in the punk movement as the politics of identity. This confusion results from a more profound paradox involved in my definition of the aesthetics of punk: although it is an empty expressionism of singularity, it at the same time

functions as the biopolitical imperative that decides one's identity as a punk. This is confusingly paradoxical, especially when I, following Hardt and Negri, defined singularity as a certain kind of critique of identity; but this, as I will explain, is also logical.

The paradox not only results from a logical necessity, but it also concerns my insistence that the analysis of the punk aesthetic becomes meaningful for a critical understanding of Hardt and Negri's advocacy of the new Leftist movement in the future. Toward the end of *Multitude*, after repeating the definition of the multitude as being "composed of radical differences, singularities, that can never be synthesized in an identity,"<sup>21</sup> they argue that the "primary decision made by the multitude is really the decision to create a new race or, rather, a new humanity."<sup>22</sup> "Race" is, of course, what we usually regard as a category of identity. Presumably, they tentatively call the multitude "a new race" because of its biopolitical nature — it is described in terms of corporeality or bodily metaphors since the imperative for the singular subject, according to them, is "Become different than you are!"<sup>23</sup> in a "spontaneous and improvised" process<sup>24</sup> without appeal to any "political" program — and they quickly revise "race" to "humanity." So, it is possible to consider their use of "race" as a slip of tongue (although they use the word four times in the paragraph), but there certainly is a need to use some category of identity to describe the goal for the multitude because it is by definition unrepresentable: they have to use their neologism, "multitude," or to adopt a certain existing category of identity that is named and representable.

After the appeal to the creation of "a new humanity," furthermore, Hardt and Negri justify the appeal to identity with a re-definition of "love": "When love is conceived politically, then, this creation of a new humanity is the ultimate act of love."<sup>25</sup> Even though the appeal to the category of identity, "a new humanity," may involve the identitarian limit of exclusion and inclusion, the limit is to be amended by re-creating the bond of the collectivity, or a new form of love that is "conceived politically." This may be so; yet we hardly need reminding that when the neoconservatives promoted neoliberal programs, they also appealed to love in terms of "family values" in order to destroy existing social and cultural communities — recall Margaret Thatcher's declaration that "there is no such thing as society"<sup>26</sup> — and to introduce the market fundamentalism of free competition. Thatcher and Hardt and Negri are of course saying different, or even opposing, things, but they both are talking in the same paradigm: it is the mysterious "love" as a sophisticated instance of personal responsibility. In its context Hardt and Negri clearly imply by "love" something wider than the normative heterosexual bondage, but even Thatcher continues after the declaration: "It's our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbor." This is a political form of "love" and is, certainly, a good thing.

In order to analyze the paradox of singularity and identity in punk aesthetics, we need to pay attention to one of the ideological cores of the punk movement: the DIY philosophy. It clearly looks ideologically meaningful when O'Hara introduces it as a

kind of base structure that defines punk's difference: "Punk Rock has differed from standard Rock and Roll not only in sound, lyrical content and performance styles, but also in the way bands do their business and interact with the audiences."

DIY thus means that punks belong to independent labels, publish their own 'zines, and manage their shows by themselves. According to him, the reason the DIY tactic is meaningful is: "By working for a major label and giving them the right to market a band's songs, art works, lyrics, and image for them, a band places commercial success over creativity and messages."<sup>28</sup>

I do not deny that there must have been cases where major labels forced punk bands to commercialize, suppressing their artistic initiative. Yet, what O'Hara's rhetoric demonstrates is the effect of the differentiating machine where there cannot be anyone in the major labels who appreciates the artistic side of the bands. Postulating the demonic Other, his rhetoric becomes Manichean, where to belong to a major label means to yield to commercialism. It is in this rhetoric that belonging (to which label) becomes the central matter, for "major label" is conceptualized as something contagious: if one touches it, one must contract the disease. Here, DIY means the transformation of anti-commercialism into the politics of identity: you have to belong to a race other than that of the major labels in order to criticize commercialism at all.

Regarding commercialism as contagious in this way involves another rhetoric that defies representation. The philosophy of DIY insists that you can never be represented correctly by anyone else: hence you must do everything by yourself. DIY is the rejection of delegation. To be a punk means to be a radical individualist. In other words, individualism here signifies the othering of others.

In considering this, Brian Cogan's note on DIY seems more acceptable: "Although there is no one complete easy definition of the DIY aesthetic and many punks disagree among themselves as to what truly constitutes a true DIY initiative, it can be sufficient to summarize the DIY ethos as one of independence from corporate control with an emphasis on individual creativity and self-expression. The DIY aesthetics is controversial to this day as to the extent one can work within the system and how much an individual can have control over his or her work and means of production."<sup>29</sup> This explanation very clearly shows, firstly, that from the tension between the desire to define the "true DIY initiative" and its impossibility follows the identitarian paradigm of inclusion and exclusion, and, secondly, that because of the paradigm, DIY as an aesthetic can function only with the confusion about the borderline that tells a true punk from a not-so-true punk.

Logically speaking, this results from the commitment of punk aesthetics to singularity: because the essence of a punk is an indefinable and unrepresentable difference, the philosophy of punk should, simultaneously, work within the rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion (in trying to valorize the impossible difference) and face the structural impossibility of defining the identity of punk. And yet, at the same time, this is also where we should understand that this paradox of singularity makes no

exception for punk aesthetics. We use “race” as a category of identity as a matter of everyday language, but what is “blackness” and who are “black people”? The moment we start thinking of the discourse of race critically, we notice that the category of “black” is a historical construct that works only in the confusion at the borderline, that the essence of “blackness” can only be defined as an indefinable difference when we try to use the category of “black” tactically, and that the concept of the community of “black people” can be meaningful at all only when we conceptualize it as a set of singularities, that is, not as a group of people who are uniform in whatever sense but as a set of people who are essentially different from one another. In a sense, an appeal to identity always involves a latent appeal to singularity: categorization of people is conceivable only when we unwittingly posit its indefinable and mysterious essence as difference, insofar as we believe that each and every human being is different. The conceptualization of singularity is a critical commitment that reveals the paradox involved in the rhetoric of identity and its politics rather than sophistication or amendment of the politics of identity. In using the rhetoric of belonging and non-belonging, the notion of singularity insists that its entailing politics illogically remain, while it should be logically impossible when singularity is by definition indefinable. In other words, the rhetoric of singularity only completes the paradigm of difference involved in that of identity.

Part of the first quote from Hardt and Negri should be repeated here to argue the point more clearly:

The component parts of the people are indifferent in their unity; they become an identity by negating or setting aside their differences. The plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people.

Of course, the people are not a homogeneous collectivity; “the people” here are conceptualized as homogeneous in a certain kind of political discourse. By the same token, I do not believe that it ever happened that the “component parts” of the people became identical; the concept of the people has always been part of the confusion at the borderline that tells those who belong to it from those who do not. That is to say, we do not have to “become different than we are” in order to forge the multitude: we are already forging the multitude, logically speaking, since we are different from one another and we only have an impossible singularity, or the essence of us as one people, in order to imagine us as a people. As Deleuze argues, the heterotopia of singular differences is our ontological condition, our state of nature, if we believe in the value of singularity in the first place. To advocate for a return to the status quo of singularity is a philosophical perversion, if not a new form of conservatism.

Analyzing the L.A. punk movement from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Daniel S. Traber critically calls the aesthetics he finds in it “self-marginalization.”<sup>30</sup> Quoting

Black Flag's "White Minority" — "Gonna be a white minority / All the rest'll be the majority / We're gonna feel inferiority / I'm gonna be a white minority" — as an epigraph for the essay, he observes:

Clearly there are political motivations behind self-marginalization in punk, but its initial and fundamental concern is that of a privatized quest to differentiate one's self from the status quo, as a person free of control outside him/herself<sup>31</sup>

Commitment to singularity is commitment to freedom by way of making one's essence a radical difference. The theoretical shift changes the notion of culture as an aesthetic realization into the expression of one's belonging, for the singular subject without representable truth principally defies anything universal in the paradox that my essence as difference is universal. In this sense, the concept of singular subject is an attempt to imagine what can be called an ontological minority: one is marginalized in the world of the Truth when one is a figure of radical difference. Theoretically speaking, this is where one can only claim "spontaneous and improvised" desires, for, under the rule of Truth, the marginalized cannot appeal to reason or rationality, as Hardt and Negri correctly observe: "What Lenin and the soviets proposed as the objective of the insurrectional activity of an elite vanguard...must be expressed today through the desire of the entire multitude."<sup>32</sup> Since the principle of the multitude is not reason but desire, the process it will use should only be "spontaneous and improvised." Commitment to singularity is commitment to the desiring subject. Hardt and Negri are here using the same paradigm as neoliberal market fundamentalism toward apparently opposite ends (and signifying their congruence with punks). So, probably, the true problem is whether or not our essential desire is for neoliberalism: an assertion hard to refute.

### **Conclusion: Limit of the Biopolitical Program**

My argument presupposes a vague impression of the ubiquity of the notion of punk, or commitment to the "spirit" of punk, in contemporary culture, and a rough mapping of rock history before and after punk. As for the former, although many seem to agree that the original punk movement was rather short-lived (which is only natural if we believe that a self-destructive tendency is one of its elements), there have been various "resurrections" of punk not only in terms of the developed, or watered-down, forms of hardcore, straight-edge, emo, pop-punk, etc., but also in the way that a band that does not follow the musical style, like the Smiths or the Prodigy, for two contrasting examples, is described as an heir of the spirit of punk. While it is naturally confusing as to who is the true heir, the situation becomes all the more confused when the spirit of punk is argued to be found in various cultures other than popular music. In an anthology titled *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, we are able to find

arguments for punk spirit in fine art, literature, science fiction (cyberpunk), film, comics, fashion, and so on. I believe that the popularity of the word does not simply come from abuse of the notion, but rather that it came to be used as an umbrella term for biopolitical rebellion. In other words, the fundamental point of my argument is that Hardt and Negri's political program is punk.

With regard to history, my point is to see in the original punk movement a stark watershed where identitarianism replaced universalism.<sup>33</sup> One example of the end of universalism is the absence of a British invasion after punk: when, as a variation of the punk spirit, the idea of universal success ceased to appeal and a local success came to be seen as just as valuable as a global one; the Smiths or Oasis, for example, probably the most successful bands respectively in the 1980s and 1990s in Britain, both of them defining their character in terms of the tradition of Britishness, did not dream the dream of conquering the American market.

I do not consider this absence to be accidental, since the meaning of "genre" in popular music seems to have changed in this regard. Rock music before punk was essentially based on the appropriation of black music. Early rock 'n' roll bands played and learned from R&B, and in the 1950s the color line in musical categorization was not strict or strong: a black musician could play rock 'n' roll. Of course, the problem of the color line is complex and complicated, but in the 1960s there still was Jimi Hendrix, and the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton can be seen as, to some degree, white musicians trying to play black music, while punk is essentially regarded as a white movement. Rock's appropriation of black music is undoubtedly a form of exploitation, but the exploitation is only conceivable due to the appeal of the universal aesthetic value of music: they exploited R&B because R&B is great regardless of the color of those who play it. It is only when the notion of universal music has lost its appeal, then, that "mixture rock," white rock with black rhythm, is possible as a subgenre: just as the notion of a hybrid is possible only when one admits the existence of race as an entity, so mixture is possible only when black music and white music are conceived of as being essentially different. Why do we regard Hendrix as a rock guitarist while we call Prince the genius of R&B?

It is interesting that the glam rock movement frequently used identity as its theme, as most clearly exemplified by David Bowie (or the Lodger, Ziggy Stardust, Aladdin Sane), who also questioned the representative nature of the rock hero in such songs as "Fame," "Heroes," and so on, just before the rise of punk; this is assuming that the universalism in rock music before punk took the form of the appeal of aesthetic sophistication in terms of art and progressive rocks, and that the punk movement is in essence a rebellion against such universalism. For the changes in the meaning of genre are found not only in relation to race. The music scene after punk sees a proliferation of various subgenres such as hardcore, slash, emo, alternative, techno, dance, house, mixture, neo-acoustic, and world music. As Grossberg argues, the rock music scene is always more or less sectarian with the effect of the differentiating

machine. Yet, while the paradox of subgenre before punk means that the belief in genre means to believe in the value of the music that belongs to it — insisting, even if parochially, that the genre has universal value (witness the formation of Southern rock, for example) — the paradox of genre after punk signifies that, while each musician hates categorization, he or she at the same time makes an appeal to the value of authenticity in terms of the genre's rules (c.f., the subgenre of emo). This is the contrast between universalism and identitarianism. Genres must be transcended in universalism; they must proliferate in identitarianism.

I do not believe that the watershed symbolized by the punk movement happened only in the logic inherent in the field of music. It must have involved a wider configuration in our cultural politics, most generally observed in relation to the shifts of paradigms around the end of Cold War, or, for example, Francis Fukuyama's corresponding insistence of the end of history. So my point here is that while Fukuyama's argument is valuable when we consider it as an observation on our cultural politics in general that the universalist discourse of progress is coming to be seen as obsolete, the end of history is not conceived (only) because of the end of communism in international politics. Even in the history of pop music, as I have tried to argue, the replacement of universalism with the rhetoric of identity is traceable as a necessity of history, not as any form of deprivation or coercion.

In other words, the desire for self-marginalization involved in the punk movement should be regarded as the epitome of the problems of our cultural politics in the post-Cold War era. After the part quoted above, Traber identifies the "privatized quest" of the marginalized self as the "crusade for individualism, for escaping the authority of society."<sup>34</sup> The cultural analysis of punk is meaningful since punk, on one hand, is obviously a non-conformist rebellion against control society, which basically is the universalist paradigm of Cold War discourse, as exemplified, for example, by the critique of other-directed personality in David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*; and yet punk is also, on the other hand, an identitarian movement as we have demonstrated. If this is because punk truly signifies the divide between universalism and identitarianism, Hardt and Negri's politics of singularity is to be seen as an identitarian translation of the Cold War paradigm of conformism and individualism into that of the multitude and singularity.

In a sense, it is a truly utopian and desirable thing that singular punks should form a global community of the multitude from which nobody is excluded. Yet, as I have argued, you do not have to become a punk, either philosophically or aesthetically, in order to form the utopian community: what is required is an epistemological revolution, a change not in the institution of community but in the notion of community, since what Hardt and Negri advocate is not political intervention but re-definition of the idea of solidarity. You do not have to change anything in the world; you only have to change your conception of community. On the other hand, however, there is a disturbing aporia in conceiving a community of punks because punk is and

is not a matter of lifestyle. If punk is an identity that defines its lifestyle, there should be a qualification for joining the punk community; if punk is a singularity, on the other hand, you do not have to exclude anyone because everyone is a punk.

In fact, there is already an answer to this in the biopolitical discourse: punk is not a style, nor a matter of lifestyle; it is commitment to life itself. Ian MacKaye of Minor Threat, Fugazi, and Discord Records tells us: “So first it was a fashion thing, then it was a music thing. And then I went to go see my first show, which was The Cramps. What I saw there was a room full of people who were challenging conventional thinking on every front and I realized that, whoa there’s no limit to this! It’s not a lifestyle, it’s just a way of being. Ideas, thinking, life. ‘Lifestyle’ suggests that it’s something you can check in or check out of.”<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the implication here is that to be a punk means to live one’s life to the fullest (and therefore, you cannot choose to be a punk as a mere matter of lifestyle). Here, to be a punk truly is the ultimate goal in the biopolitical paradigm where everything politically important ceases to be a matter of politics in the public world and the ultimate form of politics takes the shape of the politics of life.

And when Hardt and Negri talk about poverty in accord with their Marxist heritage, they virtually define the poor in the same line: “*The only non-localizable ‘common name’ of pure difference in all eras is that of the poor. The poor is destitute, excluded, repressed, exploited — and yet living! It is the common denominator of life, the foundation of the multitude.*”<sup>36</sup> When the poor is defined as “excluded, repressed, exploited” as well as “destitute,” not having money does not qualify for being poor; it rather is significant in its biopolitical foundation as one who is “living” in spite of deprivation. The poor is an identity, according to them. This is the reason why they argue: “*The poor is itself power. There is World Poverty, but there is above all World Possibility, and only the poor is capable of this.*”<sup>37</sup> If the poor is itself power, it is questionable whether or not one would want to grow out of poverty: it rather seems to be “a way of being” where one leads one’s life to the fullest. The most significant problem is that since Hardt and Negri treat the poor as if it were an identity, it is ambiguous what the qualification is to acquire the name of the poor. Can one be the poor if one wants to be? If to stop being the poor is not the goal of Hardt and Negri’s program, the goal instead might be that everyone becomes the poor, forming the community of the poor from which nobody is excluded.

This certainly is a program of self-marginalization. In accord with Grossberg’s critique of punk’s romanticization of its “image of alienated rebellion and its black musical sources” as the other who lives outside “everyday life,” Traber also points out: “What aims to be a critique of repression in L.A. punk ends up an agent of it, for its rejection of the dominant culture relies on adopting the stereotypes of inferior, violent, and criminal nonwhites.”<sup>38</sup> The rhetoric of singularity is in fact a mere translation of the rhetoric of identity. Ever get the feeling you’ve been cheated?

## Notes

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5. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 105.
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7. Kojin Karatani, *Tan-kyu II (Investigations II)*. 1989. Kodansha-gakujutsu-bunko. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1994.
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12. Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself* 113.
13. Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself* 114.
14. Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself* 113.
15. Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself* 113-49.
16. Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself* 114. For an analysis of the relationship between the punk movement and situationists, see Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001).
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22. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 356.
23. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 356.
24. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 354.
25. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 356.
26. See Margaret Thatcher, "Interview for Woman's Own." Margaret Thatcher Foundation. 1 January 2009. <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/speeches/displaydocument.asp?docid=106689/>>.
27. O'Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk* 133.
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29. Brian Cogan, *Encyclopedia of Punk Music and Culture* (Westport: Greenwood, 2006) 62.

30. Traber, Daniel S., "L. A.'s 'White Minority': Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization." *Cultural Critique* 48 (Spring 2001): 30-64.
31. Traber, "L. A.'s 'White Minority'" 38.
32. Hardt and Negri, *Multitude* 353-54.
33. Although it is not my intention to write an appropriate history of rock here, which is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, my crude mapping is conceptualized along the lines of George Lipsitz's argument. See George Lipsitz, "Against the Wind: Dialogic Aspects of Rock and Roll." *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990) 99-132.
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