

*Screaming for Change: Articulating a Unifying Philosophy of Punk Rock.* By Lars J. Kristiansen, Joseph R. Blaney, Philip J. Chidester, and Brent K. Simonds. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2010, 161p. (cloth) ISBN 978-0-7391-4274-5. U.S. List: \$80.00

Borrowing its title from the 1984 Uniform Choice song, *Screaming for Change* is a well-researched exploration of punk rock that attempts to explain a unified philosophy of deviance through an exploration of punk's rhetorical and ideological features. Punk is often positioned as a form of protest and rebellion — one that communicates the political and social condition of a dissatisfied youth through non-conformity, anomie, and aggression towards the social order. Much attention has focused on punk as a fashion, a minimalist musical expression, or as a subculture. Punk's familiar codes of expression include sneering, gobbing, torn and tight clothing, the use of shocking shouted lyrics, demands for attention, distorted guitars, and a "live fast, die young" ethic. In *Screaming for Change*, Kristiansen, Blaney, Chidester, and Simonds argue that traditional scholarship has focused too much on punk's musical, cultural, and social formations. Instead, they attempt to elevate punk to the level of a philosophy — as a way of seeing and experiencing the world against the power of the status quo.

*Screaming for Change* grew out of Kristiansen's Master's thesis, and it maintains that genre's familiar, five-chapter structure (i.e., introduction, literature review, method, analysis, and conclusion). The first two chapters define and situate punk, both historically and as an object of scholarly inquiry. This includes critiques of Dick Hebdige's (1979) seminal text, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, postmodern work on authenticity, and the broader study of punk within popular music genre studies. Kristiansen et al. argue that punk has been overanalyzed as a cultural artifact, including excessive focus on the slippery nature of defining punk and tracing punk's social characteristics. Traditional views have reduced punk to a juvenile, weak, and ultimately safe form of style and rebellion, "rob[bing] punk of its complexity and render[ing] it pointless and ineffectual — punk is effectively subverted into the vague and ridiculed category of teenage rebellion" (41). For the authors, romanticizing punk personalities and genres has limited critique and analysis to canonical punk bands, such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash, and others of the late 1970s British first wave. They posit that the mainstream popularity of these and other punk bands contributed to a perceptual bias in the historical scholarship that favors observing punk behavior over participation, and that denies the lived experience of punk. Instead of action and praxis, observation favors nostalgic modes of research that refuse to engage with punk rock on its own philosophical territory. The authors argue that, "punk deals mainly with concepts and ideas, and it should, therefore, be treated accordingly" (2).

Having identified this philosophical gap in the punk literature, the authors deploy ideological rhetorical criticism (IRC) and Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony to explain how punk rock gives voice to a philosophy of deviance. Understanding punk's philosophical system depends on identifying its conceptual and philosophical characteristics and detailing how they feed back into the social and cultural features of punk music. As the authors say, "punk is a way of observing the world" (9). Observing the world through the punk lens is largely about discerning a politics of change and social improvement; punk has a commitment to the common political becoming of the world. This philosophical stance is expressed through intentionally uncompromising and noisy music. It is this noise and politics that appeals to mar-

ginalized subjects that makes it a subculture. The authors argue that, in punk, the subcultural, musical, and social converge as a totality to express a unifying philosophy of opposition.

To uncover this unifying philosophy of punk, the authors ask two research questions aimed at understanding how punk texts operate expressively. The first considers the formation of punk's ideological stances — the way that punk rock forms, perpetuates, and communicates “values, norms and moral codes” (45). The second probes whether these ideological properties found in punk texts have legitimacy and consistency throughout punk's history. The authors use IRC to explain how power threatens the existence of life on Earth and how the critical apparatus of punk can counter those destructive tendencies. Using IRC, the authors reveal how dominant ideology, perpetuated through media and communications, works to delegitimize opposition. As critics, they task themselves with “giving voice to those who do not have one, to uncover the ideological properties embedded in the text” (48). Similarly, punk challenges dominant social, political, and cultural forms, as reflected in punk's well-documented engagement with organizations and movements such as Anti-Racist Action, Food Not Bombs, queer rights, feminism, anarchism, and class-based criticisms of society. The authors' investigation, then, is to uncover the ideological underpinnings that form the basis of punk's oppositional and political philosophy.

To document this philosophy's substance and consistency, Kristiansen et al. then perform close readings of four punk texts from different eras and geographies: from the United Kingdom, the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks* (1977); from Sweden, Refused's *The Shape of Punk to Come* (1998); and from Southern California, Bad Religion's *Suffer* (1988) and NOFX's *Wolves in Wolves' Clothing* (2006). Studying these albums as textual artifacts, the authors identify prevalent musical styles, artistic modes, and lyrical themes that explain punk's ideology of opposition and social exclusion. The authors use Gramsci's theory of hegemony to bring the different strands of punk's resistance together into a unified strategy of counter-hegemony. Punks engage in what Gramsci (1971) calls the “war of position” (238-239). The subcultural stance, the lack of conformity, the public shock of punk in its early form, and the opposition to decency and liberal bourgeois norms are all part of a cultural resistance to hegemonic domination. Punks, then, are organic intellectuals who reject liberal society's common sense assumptions and beliefs that perpetuate capitalism's inequalities and divisions. Kristiansen et al. conclude that all four albums reveal an opposition to power that, while varied and nuanced, is encapsulated in punk's “us vs. them” attitude. Each album critiques social norms and habits through criticisms of leaders, authority, politics, religion, government, and other dominating social structures. Punk, then, brings together subcultural identity and social criticism in a musical form that articulates a unified philosophy engaged with critiquing the human condition and drawing attention to social hypocrisy.

The authors conclude that a conditional philosophy of punk derived from a “common mindset” of specific values can be discerned in their analysis, but caution that the limitations of their study make this a debatable point (144). The analysis suffers from a lack of scope, which the authors acknowledge, noting that the sample size is, in their words, “miniscule.” They recognize that there are numerous other punk texts and punk subgenres (e.g., ska-punk, skate punk, psychobilly, post-punk) that could have also been analyzed and would have led to the same conclusions, and many that would not have. Indeed, it is here that a “unified” philosophy of punk is at its most contestable.

The book is further constrained by its structure as a Master's thesis with much repetition and time spent reviewing the literature rather than elaborating on how punk's unified philosophy helps to displace actual structures of power. Indeed, punk's origins can be read as a return to rock music's roots — a reaction against the pomposity of 1970s "progressive" rock. There are also many punk bands that could be described as apolitical or socially apathetic.

In addition, while punk is certainly well known for its opposition and deviance, many punks are politically conservative, some even violently so. Punk does not have a monopoly on critiquing social structures of power, and oppositional themes can also be found in folk, country, and experimental music. Moreover, why choose predominantly white, male, Western bands to make an argument about punk as an oppositional philosophy? Can one champion a philosophy of deviance while maintaining the status quo? Race, sex, and gender are mentioned in passing, but these social stratifications remain absent in the actual case studies.

Despite these limitations, Kristiansen and his committee have admirably detailed the different histories and scholarly lineages of punk studies as they relate to ideology and rhetoric. For those new to punk rock or punk studies, this makes *Screaming for Change* an invaluable introduction. The book fails to articulate a unified philosophy of punk, partially because of the constraints of their study, but also because finding a unified philosophy of such a variegated cultural and social phenomena may be impossible. It does succeed, though, in locating a predominant anti-authoritarianism that characterizes much punk rock and in connecting it to Gramsci's ideas. It will be interesting to see if Kristiansen et al. continue this analysis into the future and, if so, if it will develop into a more inclusive critical theory of punk that incorporates difference into their philosophy.

## References

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