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Out of Step with the World

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Punk (and specifically hardcore punk) has from the start presented itself as a counterculture—and has prided itself on being so. From Minor Threat onwards, hardcore/punk artists have commended the value of living life “against the grain,” in opposition to mainstream norms and practices.

This embrace of cultural independence is expressed in punk’s *do-it-yourself* ethic, developed from the early 1980s onwards in conscious resistance to the music industry. Inspired by this ethic, youth across the world involved in hardcore/punk have created their own independent record labels, cut-and-pasted their own fanzines, organized their own shows, and formed and supported their own local music scenes. Countless hardcore/punk songs over the past forty years have developed and defended the value of being a *counterculture*—a culture that permits punks to live in defiance of “society and their rules” (Warzone, “It’s Your Choice”).

What are we to make of the cultural rebellion of hardcore/punks? Is there any ethical value in the pursuit of cultural nonconformity? Distinct moral justifications for cultural nonconformity can be teased from the lyrics of the hardcore/punk bands that we have grown up with and still love.

The best explanation of what makes cultural nonconformity morally valuable, we believe, comes from the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (1806–1873): it opens up new cultural space to oneself and to others, permitting “new and original experiments of living” (*On Liberty*, p. 281).

What Is Cultural Nonconformity?

How should we understand the idea of cultural nonconformity? Cultures are systems of values, embodied in social norms and practices. By “pursuing cultural nonconformity,” we mean the adoption and development of ways of living in principled opposition to mainstream values, norms, and practices. These alternative ways of living—countercultures—are expressive of and shaped by interpretations of personal and moral values at odds with the rest of society. Cultural nonconformity, thus understood, has both critical and constructive dimensions. It criticizes prevailing norms and practices, and people’s unquestioned commitment to them, while constructively fashioning cultural alternatives. The idea of cultural nonconformity becomes clearer by contrasting it to two related notions: autonomy, or “living by one’s own rules,” and authenticity, or “staying true to yourself” (Guiding Line, “Break the Chain”). While hardcore/punk artists have often praised autonomy and authenticity, our position is that cultural nonconformity is a distinct concept and value.

Consider first the idea of autonomy. Following the Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Christine Korsgaard defines autonomy as the ability to “engage in conduct that is governed by laws that you give to yourself.” Autonomy consists in self-governance, in living by rules of one’s own making. The hardcore/punk ethic endorses living life on one’s own terms and in pursuit of one’s own aims, captured in the desire to be “master of my destiny” (Trail of Lies, “Master of My Destiny”), and “my own control” (Throwdown, “Program”).

As the rules governing our lives are not our own creation, attempts to increase personal autonomy can prompt rebellion. Many hardcore/punk artists have objected to being compelled to live under rules set by others, on the ground that this disregards their capacity for self-determination. “Why should I listen to those fools / I’m going to live by my rules” (Void, “My Rules”). In “Can’t Tell No One,” Negative Approach even claim that rules as such, regardless of their content, make a mockery of our powers of self-governance: “Rules are made for idiots / People that can’t think / I’m treated like I don’t have a mind of my own”. Others curse social structures stifling our agency. “Conditioned inside and out / to the point of no return / To what we may have been / without all this shit we were born into” (Tragedy, “The Point of No Return”).

From the very start, hardcore/punk artists have portrayed themselves as critical and rational individuals—as “forward

thinking youth” willing and able to “flex their head,” and to decide for themselves what form of life is worth pursuing (Modern Life Is War, “Self-Preservation”). The phrase “flex your head” alludes to the seminal hardcore punk compilation *Flex Your Head*). Humans are “armed with a mind,” as Have Heart put it: “It’s the gift inside our heads not to take for granted / Because an unexamined life is a seed unplanted” (Have Heart, “Armed with a Mind”). There is moral value, these artists claim, in acting on the distinctly human capacity for self-direction. Even more, hardcore/punks were willing to act on their convictions, willing to turn their backs on society and to go it alone.

The idea of autonomy (“self-governance”) is closely related to but distinct from that of authenticity (“acting in light of a proper view of oneself”). In *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Charles Taylor describes the last ideal as follows: “Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I am also defining myself. I am realizing a potentiality that is properly my own” (p. 29). Authenticity requires self-realization, or the process of bringing about the unique potential found within ourselves.

Authenticity, thus understood, is a more demanding ideal than autonomy. It requires not only freely making our own choices but also choosing rightly—choosing that path which most accords with our own inner nature. The song “Godhead” by Burn captures the idea and value of authenticity: “Let me witness my true self, out in the bare / So I can realize my potential for greatness / or the possibility of failure.” Inauthenticity is not the same as hypocrisy, although both involve inconsistencies revealed in behavior. According to Judith Shklar, actions or choices are inauthentic when they jar with our “true self”; hypocritical when they knowingly clash with our declared principles or attitudes. Crass duly called Steve Jones, guitarist for the Sex Pistols, a hypocrite: “preaching revolution, anarchy, and change / as he sucked from the system that had given him his name” (“Punk Is Dead”).

Neither autonomy nor authenticity require cultural nonconformity. Indeed, Taylor dismissed the notion that “the enemy of authenticity . . . is social conformity.” It is a mistake to think that we can only meet “the demands of self-truth” by rebelling against external norms (p. 63). People may find their true identity and life-satisfaction squarely within the confines of mainstream culture. Conversely, some punks are posers—their attachment to hardcore/punk culture is merely surface level, embracing the aesthetic trappings without being committed to

the ideals that inform this aesthetic. As Ray Cappo pointed out, "Personality can't be purchased / in a skateboard store" ("Alternative Nation"). Some people adopt countercultural lifestyles for lousy reasons ("because it looks cool"). And yet, pursuing cultural nonconformity can be ethically valuable even if the punks in question are insincere or acting exclusively on peer pressure. The value in practicing cultural nonconformity cannot be reduced therefore to either authenticity or autonomy.

A Wrench in the System

Unlike autonomy and authenticity, cultural nonconformity presupposes rejection of some prevailing social norms and practices. Social criticism has been a staple of hardcore/punk lyrics from the start. We encourage readers to look up the lyrics of "Just Look Around" by Sick of It All—theirs is a particularly forceful condemnation of social injustice and of politicians' cynical encouragement of racial divisions. The punk band Poison Idea expressed their concerns slightly less eloquently: "The truth is as clear as a cesspool / I say piss on all your fucking rules / I'll bite the hand that feeds me shit / I am getting sick of the taste of it." Having declared those rules illegitimate, Poison Idea flatly denied to be bound by them: "What are they for? Why were rules made? To be broken!" ("Made to Be Broken"). The ethos in lyrics like these is one of alienation from a socio-political system perceived as broken and corrupt. A common identity is formed in that alienation, in opposition to mainstream norm-abiding behavior. Strike Anywhere put it in a nutshell: "To live in discontent / anti-establishment" ("Chorus of One"). Cultural nonconformity consists in more than just social critique, however. It also involves constructing new ways of living, in opposition to accepted social norms and practices.

Cultural nonconformity can be valuable in two ways: *contingent* and *general*. According to the contingent justification, the value in cultural nonconformity lies in replacing harmful societal norms and practices with morally better ones. Cultural nonconformity is morally valuable only in some conditions: *if* mainstream cultural practices are morally flawed and *if* the counterculture successfully embodies ways of living that are not similarly bankrupt. On the general justification, cultural nonconformity is valuable as such, regardless of the moral quality of the social norms it opposes and of the cultural alternatives it introduces.

The contingent line of justification is rife in both the vegan straight edge movement, inspired by the band Earth Crisis,

and the revolutionary anarchism of groups like Crass. The vegan straight edge movement views cultural nonconformity as an act of moral purity in a world of evil. The nonconformist prefigures the just world to come and looks to save themselves from spiritual destruction through their nonconformity: "through my refusal to partake, I saved myself" (Earth Crisis, "The Discipline"). Self-righteous resignation proved a popular response to the perceived immorality of popular culture among hardcore/punks. Take the hardcore band The Path of Resistance: "Those brainless clones repulse me / So I'll walk alone / And all I need is one friend called Truth / and my heart is its home" (The Path of Resistance, "Counter"). Or the vegan warriors in Ecostrike: "I walk amongst the few / who swear their hearts to what they know is true" ("Amongst the Few"). So-called hardliners have taken a still more militant stance, advocating direct action to eradicate purported injustices. "Action must be taken to free the world from its sickness / Action for justice / leads to / freedom" (Arkangel, "Day of Apocalypse").

Many of the moral and political judgments voiced by vegan straightedge bands are questionable. Many will disagree with their hyperbolic cries about how morally degraded modern society. Is today's bioindustry truly "a common grave for our morals / an archaic way of thinking / so monstrous and absurd"? (Heaven Shall Burn, "The Voice of the Voiceless"). For the vegan straightedge counterculture to have moral value on the contingent justification, claims like these need not be true. Yet the contingent justification does require their counterculture to be morally superior to the mainstream cultural practices it opposes. Subcultures shaped by militancy, intolerance, and other illiberal values, like the hardline movement, clearly fail to meet this threshold (The band Vegan Reich popularized the term 'hardline'. Their eponymous EP (*Hardline*, 1990) contained a 'hardline manifesto' threatening violence to those harming innocent life—including the lives of fetuses and animals.) Hardline bands have proposed means of resistance bordering on terrorism—"a firestorm to purify" (Earth Crisis, "Firestorm"). Even vegans will agree that a counterculture built around such extremist views is morally worse than the mainstream cultural practices it seeks to replace.

Through its principled, constructive opposition to mainstream cultural practices, hardcore/punk helps provide the distance needed to critically evaluate obtaining norms and practices. Calling out complacency, Refused shouted: "It's not okay / to pretend everything's alright" (Refused, "It's Not Okay to Pretend Everything's Alright"). The anarcho-punk band,

Flux of Pink Indians, decry treating natural resources as exploitable commodities, irrespective of their meaning for others: "you don't want these trees / you only want towns and cities . . . this is just a wood to you / but this is my home . . . I don't want your progress / it tries to kill me / me / you / we." (Flux of Pink Indians, "Progress"). In questioning harmful norms and beliefs like these, cultural nonconformity places their content, and our commitment to them, under scrutiny. Moreover, by fashioning cultural alternatives, it shows that such norms are neither natural nor unavoidable. In this way, cultural nonconformity acts as a wrench in the machine of our common ways of living.

New Models of Living

Cultural nonconformity can have ethical value beyond it being a spark for moral progress. Developing countercultural alternatives might be valuable *in general*, regardless of the moral quality of the mainstream culture it opposes and regardless of whether one succeeds in developing morally superior cultural alternatives. It might seem silly to oppose benign cultural practices like disco music. And yet, we claim, cultural nonconformity enlarges the sphere of pluralism and freedom that underwrites the possibility of authenticity and self-governance. There is value in opposing "an oriented public whose magnetic force does pull / but away from the potential of the individual" (Bad Religion, "Against the Grain"). Resisting the magnetic pull of the masses opens up cultural space for everyone, and that is good in itself and thus morally valuable even in a reasonably just society.

The most eloquent philosophical defense of cultural rebellion is that of J.S. Mill in *On Liberty*.

In this age, the mere example of nonconformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service. Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. (p. 269)

Mill regarded opposing "the tyranny of the majority" especially useful in conformist Victorian England of his day and age, to help overcome debilitating popular mediocrity. Yet he stressed that cultural nonconformity has ethical value in general: it everywhere enables the "free development of individuality." Prevailing customs may suit some people, while crippling others. Given the diversity of human personalities, cultural free-

dom and pluralism is needed for all human beings to flourish. "Human beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not undistinguishably alike" (p. 219). That thought resonates with the band Free: "Be yourself / not like the fucking masses" (Free, "MA Flex").

Mill's defense of cultural nonconformity was later taken up by the British-Latvian philosopher Isaiah Berlin (1909–1997). People should be free, Berlin argued, to seek and pursue their own conceptions of the good. Differences in ways of living should be celebrated rather than repressed. Berlin believed in value pluralism: no single way of living can capture all that is valuable. "If there are many and competing genuine values, then the greater the extent to which a society tends to be single-valued, the more genuine values it neglects or suppresses. More, to this extent, must mean better" (Bernard Williams, "Introduction," to *Isaiah Berlin*). Countercultures help prevent cultural homogenization and ensuing loss of value. "No rules, just be yourself / Don't rely on anyone else / No wrong or right / no certain way to be" (Insted, "No Rules").

Mill's defense of cultural nonconformity is elitist. He encouraged cultural dissent in part because he believed it allows for the free development of "persons of genius" who could overcome "collective mediocrity" (pp. 267–68). Our position, by contrast, is that cultural nonconformity is ethically valuable because it enlarges cultural space *for everyone*. Countercultures are sources of creativity, encouraging people to work together to develop truly alternative ways of living. Countercultures thus increase the number of cultural resources—models for living—available to people: resources on which they can draw to fashion their own social identity and way of life.

Hardcore/punk is and always has been "more than music" (Verbal Assault, "More than Music"). As a counterculture, it offers cultural resources for both personal identity-formation and purpose-creation. Having people pursue and develop genuinely alternative ways of living is good for everyone insofar as it increases the stock of culturally available lifestyles. Provided, of course, that the countercultural lifestyles are not themselves harmful (for instance by encouraging substance abuse or undue social conflict). The value of cultural enrichment is not conditional on mainstream cultural practices being harmful or unjust. Nor does it require widespread adoption of countercultural ideas and practices. Countercultures enhance cultural pluralism through their existence, not their popularity.

Pursuing cultural nonconformity is ethically valuable in general, we believe, since it increases the culturally available set of models of living. More such models make it easier for individuals to readily find ways of living that are authentic to them—without being hemmed in by societal expectations (as those generally diminish in force in conditions of cultural pluralism). Significantly, even those contributing to the hardcore/punk culture unthinkingly or insincerely help expand our cultural repertoire. Witness the common claim that the ideal of sober living will hold “true” regardless of how many “fakes” “break edge” (As an example, Carry On, “What Once Was”).

A Positive Change?

For many hardcore/punk artists, the only meaningful form of cultural nonconformity left open to us today is total disengagement. If societal injustices are deemed irreparable, the only reasonable solution may be dropping out. The Youth of Today song “Disengage” captures this sentiment well: “In this age when everything’s falling apart / disengage / don’t think I’m crazy / for not wanting to take part” (Youth of Today, “Disengage”). Ceding in any way to prevailing norms and practices seemingly puts us right back where we started; a willing participant in a collapsing society.

Yet the “drop out” solution brings with it moral hazards of its own. If the prize of our own moral purity can only be attained at the expense of abandoning our social obligations and entanglements—say, the good of our dependents and compatriots—we might begin to question our commitment to moral purity. Other hardcore/punks have explored a rival solution: working together to prefigure or bring about positive change, however trivial. This strategy involves developing bonds of solidarity: “we gotta care together / and see this to the end.” Kevin Seconds urges us to try even when risking falter: “you say we have no future / do we have a chance?” (7 Seconds, “The Crew”). Cultural nonconformity can therefore be compatible with societal *engagement*, with a positive commitment to partake in the larger political project of shaping our world.

Through its critical edge, cultural nonconformity creates the space required for new cultural norms and practices to develop. Constructively, it enlarges the set of cultural resources available to all for personal identity-formation and purpose-creation—thus bolstering the cultural preconditions for self-governance and authenticity. Many of us proceed through life feeling that “there’s something wrong / I got a feeling that

I / I don't belong here" (Jerry's Kids, "I Don't Belong"). As Mindset writes: "I know I'll never know / what it means to live at ease in line with the status quo / I'll stand alone" (Mindset, "Counterpoint"). Cultural nonconformity helps counter such feelings of alienation and isolation by promoting and developing new experiments in living. Through its pursuit we can gain affirmation of our own manner of living. More empoweringly still, at its best it produces positive alternatives that are inspiring and that we can affirm, with clenched fists, open hearts, and open minds (an allusion to both *The First Step*, "Something Inside" and Mindset, "Leave No Doubt").