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INTERGENERATIONAL RELATIONS AND AGEING IN THE PUNK SUBCULTURE

In relation to the overarching theme of the volume, this article investigates the problem of ageing within the punk subculture in Poland and punk abroad as relevant to Polish punks. It challenges the notion that punk is a youth subculture and on the examples of prominent punk performers on the Polish scene and abroad demonstrates how important the continuous involvement of people aged 35-70 is for their communities and for the subculture as such, also in terms of their cooperation with younger performers and the younger generations' understanding of continuity and tradition within punk. The framework for this investigation includes the philosophical understanding of punk as a movement dating back to its roots in Dadaism and Situationism, as well as its concrete manifestations as observed in the ethnographies of selected communities in Poland, conducted by the author. The analysis is sensitive to the economic and political contexts of the transformation of 1989 and the transnational and simultaneously local nature of the punk subculture, which in its artistic output as well as in its practices underlines the importance of specific older performers or activists.

Key words: ageing; punk; subculture; intergenerational relations; identity; nostalgia; tradition; DIY culture.

It is a sign of the times that such academic journals as *Studia Socjologiczne* are undertaking the problem of ageing in European societies as a research question. This subject has also been taken up by scholars in other fields, including musicology, for example the journal *Popular Music* has published articles on the continuing relevance of pop music for ageing audiences back in 2012, where Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor have examined the relationship between popular music, ageing and identity (Bennett and Taylor, 2012). Polish scholars like Sławomir Kurek have also written on the subject from the point of view of human geography. Kurek has noted that according to UN prognoses, Europe will remain the world's oldest continent until 2050 (Kurek 2011:163). He links such factors as secularization, growth of higher education, "the rise of individualistic values, the importance of self-expression and self-fulfillment" as crucial in affecting the general population's decisions to form traditional families, have

children, and thus reverse the ageing demographic trends. Another factor he mentions is the higher competitiveness of the market economy which greatly increases the obstacles in obtaining a desired socio-economic status for many people. (Kurek 2011: 164–165)

I would like to take a moment to look into how these trends affect a specific community in Poland and abroad, which is very vocal about its self-identity and expression of grievances as well as undertaking action to bring about change in the lives of its members. This group has first attracted the attention of sociological research in the 1980s, when it became the subject of articles in the popular press due to its special appeal to youth and the ability to influence the behavior and attitudes of large numbers of young people, disillusioned with mainstream culture and its inability to meet its cultural needs. This transnational community is the punk subculture, which has developed in Poland since the late 1970s, when it has first made an appearance in public space and subverted previous approaches to creativity and activism in music and politics.

Punk has since then entered the mainstream and become commercialized, rationalized, and somewhat made safe for fashion and adolescent rebellion. So much so that even non-punks are familiar with some of the slogans concerning the subculture, including “punk’s not dead.” But what does it really mean for the men and women engaged in the punk subculture that have long passed the upper age limit of what is commonly considered “youthfulness”? As a 33-year-old concept, has it exhausted its original meaning and relevance to those still subscribing to the punk ethos today, both those who remember hearing the Exploited’s album bearing that title when it was first released and those who were born long after the fact? As J. Patrick Williams wrote in *Subcultural Theory: Traditions and Concepts*,

Subcultural affiliation is most likely to begin during adolescence, but its significance can last a lifetime. The concept of youth subcultures (...) rhetorically denies the continuing significance of subcultural participation to those of us who have accidentally grown up and grown older over the years. (Williams 2011: ix-x)

In this paper, I would like to argue that it is indeed no accident that people grow up and grow old in punk. To that end, I will discuss the role that age plays within the punk subculture today and how punks consciously work within the shared context of their punk history, if not almost within reach of a punk past that they all could not have shared. Another subject that I would like to bring to the table is the functioning of punk in its historical context, namely that of the waning regime of People’s Poland versus the capitalist Babylon of post 1989, a major characteristic of the post ’89 scene being its perpetual nostalgia for the good old days of when the scene was both larger and stronger. Punk is a very nostalgic subculture, although it is also at the same time oriented toward

the “here and now.” The point of reference is nevertheless often placed in the inaccessible past, whether the reminiscing punk had a chance to participate in it or not. Finally, I will bring up the subject of intergenerational respect and cooperation between the older and younger punks, especially musicians, and how these shape the contemporary punk scene in Poland. My major source for this undertaking springs from the results of my oral history and ethnographic research that I conducted in Poland and in the United States, in the years 2012–2013. I will also rely on some interpretive clues provided by ethnographers and situationist thinkers of the 1960s, especially Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem.

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The slogan “punk’s not dead” began its linguistic life as the title of a 1981 album by the British band the Exploited, who spearheaded a new era in the history of punk worldwide, after the first wave bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash had already exhausted themselves. It was a spirited contradiction of the claims of certain punk circles in England, led primarily by Penny Rimbaud of Crass, who declared on their first album, released in 1979, that punk is dead because some of those first wavers had sold out and joined the ranks of those on the system’s payroll. In 1981 also two seminal Warsaw punk bands were formed, and I believe that Zygzak, the singer of TZN Xenna, spoke for all those young punks just starting out then when he told me in our 2012 interview that:

The punk rock of those first bands, all those Kryzys, Tilts, Deadlocks, they all claimed that punk was dead, because it was connected with some Penny Rimbaud or other clown of anarchy or anarcho-punk, the Crass, who wrote some manifestos, in which he demonstrated that it had all ended. But we were young guys who thought otherwise, that nothing had ended, and that is why we decided to start a band. (Marciniak 2015: 16)

Today, Zygzak is a happy grandfather of over fifty years of age. He tours the country and beyond with the reunited Xenna throughout the year and records new as well as older material that did not get properly recorded during the band’s first incarnation. He is a prominent person in the contemporary Warsaw punk scene, where he enjoys much respect and continues to cooperate with bands made up of musicians that could be his sons or daughters. His persona, just like that of Krzysztof Grabowski, the drummer and lyricist of Dezerter, or Robert Brylewski, and several other ageing punks, raises many interesting questions in light of the stubborn persistence of the punk subculture that despite Rimbaud’s legitimate claims still refuses to die, forty years after its first appearance in the United States and roughly thirty-six since its emergence in Poland.

The Polish case is doubly interesting, however. Polish punks have a sense of humor and a certain ironic distance toward many political issues and toward themselves that is not usually shared by “Western” punks. One expression of this ironic distance is a patch that I purchased years ago at a show somewhere in Poland (or from a DIY mailorder, I can’t remember anymore) that declares “Punx not zgred” and sports the face of a cartoon character that looks like a cheeky pre-teen with a mohawk and multiple piercings. The slang term “zgred” in Polish denotes a grumpy old man who has given up on life. What is more, the idea was picked up in 2013, when a tour was organized called *Punk Not Zgred Fest*, during which 1980s’ bands like Deuter and Moskwa played in select cities.¹

Figure 1. “Punx not zgred” patch, early 2000s, Poland. Property of Marta Marciniak. Copyright: Pała.² Photo by MM.



So why do these ageing punk rockers feel the need to assert their relevance in such an obvious way? And what is it that they need to say to their audiences after so many years of performing and generally “sticking around,” while younger bands have emerged with messages that could be more relevant to those

¹ <http://www.punknotzgredfest.pl/> (Accessed April 25, 2014).

² Pała is the nickname of the author of this design, as I was told by Pietia Wierzbicki in our online correspondence in April 2014.

changing audiences? Let us focus on some select punks to see what it is about their message and stance that solidifies their impact.

Figure 2. Charlie Harper, performing with the UK Subs in M-Klub, Valašské Meziříčí, the Czech Republic, 24.2.12. Photo courtesy of photomusic.cz. Used with permission.



As I am typing up these words, probably the oldest punk rocker alive today, Charlie Harper, is about to celebrate his 70th birthday next month with a huge show at the Manchester Ritz, where his band UK Subs will appear alongside several other first and second wave British punk bands, including The Damned, The Business, and Angelic Upstarts.³ While Charlie's case is unique, also because punk exploded when he had already been in the British R&B scene for years, throughout the sixties and early seventies (Robb 2011), it does mark the tip of an iceberg: performing well into your forties and fifties is not uncommon in the punk scene today. 70 is old by any standards, however, and Charlie is beaten by that most famous of old rock and rollers who still perform, Mick Jagger, only by one year of seniority. The difference between the two is that Mick Jagger is a bloated media celebrity supported by a music-industry moloch and an army of personal coaches and trainers each time he enters the stage, while Charlie's slightly hunchback, potbellied posture is merely a product of decades of DIY touring and beer. He still does it the DIY way today, and is all the more

³ <http://louderthanwar.com/charlie-harpers-70th-birthday-special-gig-in-manchester-next-may/>

respected for it, and for staying true to the punk ethos, by fans across the world, including in Poland, where a song by his band UK Subs called “Warhead” inspired the name of a summer punk fest in Ustka, and a song by Warsaw Dolls which is about the festival but while the lyrics are about something completely different, the music is an identical copy of the original. Moreover, the UK Subs headlined the first edition of the festival in 2008, where they naturally did not fail to perform one of their most famous songs.⁴

The above photo illustrates an interesting bond between Charlie and the punks one generation below him. It shows Kondi (with his arm stretched out toward Charlie, who is holding the microphone), drummer of Bulbulators, pictured here wearing the t-shirt of the Warsaw Ramones tribute band, the Dumbs. Kondi is in his late thirties and underlines how important it was for him, as the youngest punk in his home town of Tychy when he originally started out, to earn the respect and acceptance of older punks, whose crew he desired to join. Eventually he became a fixture in the Silesian punk scene himself. When I interviewed Bulbulators in May 2010, Kondi told me:

What pisses me off today is that young people don't have respect toward the older crewmen. I have always had this respect. I was always faithful to the fact that there were older people: I used them as a resource, I listened to their records, I was their delivery boy, but they were to me like my father. As a 10-year-old shit I was so proud that I could go to shows with them. Those days will not come back. I was so proud when I met the older crewmen in Tychy: Smok, and the old skinheads, I followed them around and whatever they said was like religion to me. I was a little shit and it was very important to me. (Marciniak 2010: unpublished authorized interview)

Kondi's bandmate in Bulbulators, Burak, who also played in the legendary Ramzes and the Hooligans in the 1980s, agrees that when he was growing up, it was his desire too to join the old crew in Jastrzębie-Zdrój, and “you really had to try hard for them to accept you. I think it should still be this way.” Many more punks in Kondi's and my generation share this view, and those in bands have proven it countless times by tirelessly performing and recording covers of 1980s' bands in this traditional form of punk tribute. For instance, the compilation tribute albums *Nie ma zagrożenia – jest Dezerter* and *Dolina lalek – Tribute to Kryzys* exemplify the effort not only to acknowledge these two bands' importance but also to give back a token of gratitude by bands willed into existence by people inspired to action at Dezerter and Kryzys shows or who traded their tapes in the old days. Notable on both albums is the presence of such bands like PDS, Alians, Apatia, Włochaty, De Łindowy, Bulbulators, or Plebania – all of which started out in the 1990s, and you could say, had been brought up on

⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7RZs_RIBtzA

a steady diet of Dezerter, Kryzys, and Xenna. One of the bands featured on *Nie ma zagrozenia*, Uliczny Opryszek, even went one step further, releasing a one-band tribute album to a host of almost forgotten bands like Gruba Berta, Borygo, Corpus X or Mocz Tenora.

What this consistency in paying tribute indicates is that punk is, like Kondi said, “horribly sentimental. The seventies will never come back, and we mourn their passing. Those were the most beautiful years.” Kondi himself cannot have a personal connection with seventies’ punk, since he is too young, but his impassioned statement supports my argument, which I advanced in the first conference paper I ever wrote about punk, where I used Andy Warhol’s idea, from his *Philosophy*, that “sex is nostalgia for sex.” (Warhol 1977: 53). In the same way, I wrote, punk is nostalgia for punk. (Marciniak 2011: 63–74) In a musical sense, it can clearly be seen with the Ramones, as a most outstanding example, with their songs like “Do You Remember Rock’N’Roll Radio?” or “I Don’t Wanna Grow Up” as well as their precedents the Modern Lovers, who sang about being in love with the old world. The fascination with the outdatedness of the Ramones has actually produced countless cover and tribute bands, including in Poland, where Warsaw’s the Dumbs led the way for years before they went on hiatus in 2013. Not surprisingly, the Polish Ramones cult has also produced a compilation tribute record, called *Poland 4 Ramones*.

While Dezerter were initially very skeptical about the project of a tribute to their work (“We are still alive, playing. Erecting a monument while we’re still alive seemed a bit over the top.”) But in the end they were convinced and the drummer even made up the title and designed the cover. (Grabowski 2010: 200–201) In 2006, when *Nie ma zagrozenia* was released, however, few had an inkling of the veritable flood of books, albums, and reunions that would follow that may mark a change of tide not only in the attitude of punks toward their own “elders,” but also the rise of interest among the general public about the history and cultural significance of this subculture. Grabowski’s own book came out in 2010, preceded by *Nie będę wisiał ukrzyżowany*, *Jarocin w obiektywie bezpieki*, and followed by *Kryzys w Babilonie*, *Generacja*, *Obok albo ile procent Babilonu?* and *To zupełnie nieprawdopodobne*, to name just a few. Even the academia has finally noticed and caught up in 2013, when the book *Dekada buntu* was published by Libron. In the meantime, Kryzys reunited and again disbanded after doing a moderately successful tour and releasing the LP *Kryzys komunizmu*. Interestingly, their new line-up excluded the original singer, who has since become estranged from the subculture, and a couple eligible former horn players, but included Nancy, a younger generation guitar player known from such Warsaw bands as Junkie Train, Nowy Świat and Nancy Regan. While for many it was obviously “not the same anymore,” just like Dezerter after Skandal (their original singer) left has not been the same, nevertheless it

is useful to take a look at what such reunited or continuing bands have to say, roughly thirty years since their formation.

Robert Matera thus mused on the subject of Dezerter's continuing relevance in one interview:

I remember the conversation we had shortly after the election [the partially free election of June 1989], when we were wondering if there would still be room for bands like us. Cos since it is supposed to be well now, then what would we sing about? But it turned out that all wasn't so well after all and there were still plenty of things to talk about. Certain arrangements had changed, but people's mentality had not. "Komuna" still lives in many camouflaged forms, in people's way of thinking. (Grabowski: 121)

After 1989 Dezerter remained a relevant band, although in a changed context, and although their own plans and desires have changed. They have played countless shows for several kinds of audiences; most were discerning audiences, although they generally fall into three groups: old punks, college students, and the general populace, for example when they performed at such occasions as the eve of the anniversary of the Warsaw Uprising in 2009, or a show commemorating the 25th anniversary of the founding of Solidarity in 2005. Their decision to participate in the latter, a dubious and quite obviously politically motivated undertaking, was grounded in the belief that they should perform, or else kids would think that Perfect was "the only band that fought communism."⁵ (Grabowski: 201)

They are also relevant because they continue to talk about issues that are commonly ignored in the "decent" public debate in post '89 Poland: namely, environmental causes (see for example "Ostatnia chwila"/ "The Last Moment") and vegetarianism. In fact, Grabowski probably issued the best ever expression of my own attitude to vegetarianism when he said:

In any case me and Robert have persisted [in vegetarianism] until today. And I don't mean the word "persist" to suggest that it was some kind of sacrifice. Nothing further from the truth. To put it simply, if you are sure of your beliefs, they become something obvious. It is impossible for me to think that I could ever eat meat again. I probably wouldn't poison myself, but why would I do that? (Grabowski: 80)

Such straightforward ideals and ideas rooted in decency and common sense are often best communicated in the way in which Dezerter do it: in short, loud, and to the point songs that throw the world directly into the listener's face. Drawing attention to real issues rather than celebrity-style politics is the kind of

⁵ Perfect was a popular rock band in the early to mid-1980s, working under the auspices of the regime, with recording opportunities, and advertized as "The music of the young generation." Grabowski sarcastically remarked that "The worst is that [all these poppy-rock bands that were promoted in the media in the 1980s], are probably starting to believe it themselves that they actually fought the regime." *Poroniona generacja*, 201.

debate that is lacking in the public media today and that is part of why there will always be space for bands like them.

Punk bands that started in the 1980s remain relevant also simply because younger people want to hear them. The most powerful comment I have heard about listening to older punks came from Nancy, the singer and member of several Warsaw bands since the early 2000s that I mentioned before. She said:

Sometimes you think you know everything, you know what you want, what you like, but you meet some people or even some one person and this person is able to, without surgery, open your head and put things in there that you think, wow, yeah, you can look at the situation in this way. For me it was people born in the sixties, between '63 and '68. It's strange, but the people born in the seventies that I've met, people who are in their thirties today, they had bands, but they were mostly preoccupied with work, to go earn money somewhere, and the music they did, they did after hours, they practiced after work. You couldn't play because the majority had something... it is strange. They were teenagers in the nineties, and they had this economy expanding right in front of their eyes, they mostly studied economics, management, or IT, they started their own companies, with buddies, some partnerships. And those born in the sixties didn't have such prospects, cos they were twenty in the eighties, they went to Jarocin, or had other things, like Totart in Trójmiasto,⁶ they were only looking at art. Because of that they got a bit lost in real life, because time went by and they were still doing what they had been. But their views on the world, I don't know if it's because of how much shrooms they consumed, or how much weed they had smoked, or because they were so fancy free in the eighties, the world was so different for them and even though the age difference is only about 10 years, I have to say I always preferred to listen to the guys born in the sixties. Still today I think that their music was better. Cos they didn't have anything in the eighties, they weren't fighting for anything. And here you have this struggle, so that everything would be better. People my age as well, I have noticed, are so greedy, so greedy about work, greedy about money, for everything to be the best, and sometimes when I look into myself and see the same thing, it pains me, because it's in me too. (Marciniak 2015: 32)

Although Nancy may be misunderstanding some of the aspects of life in the eighties, i.e. "they weren't fighting for anything," which depends on your definition of fighting, I suppose, she captured some good insights here that can help us understand better why bands like Dezerter, Xenna, or Kryzys have outgrown their original frame of reference, which cannot be said about many non-punk bands from the eighties that only function today in reference to a historical style, or so that their fans can relive their youth.

As Zygzak said, he is not nostalgic for the eighties, and he does not understand people who are. For him, the only good thing about that period of time was

⁶ "Totart consisted of poets, philosophers, painters, musicians. Whatever you can say about them will not be enough." This is how Grabowski describes this group of performers in his book, *Poroniona generacja*, 96.

that he started Xenna and everything that sprang from that. The perspective of people like Zygzak is especially valuable, since they continue to be involved in the DIY scene and get to know many younger punks through playing with them. Zygzak has played with Nancy Regan and he has actually spent time socially with Nancy since he saw her first band, Junkie Train. He realizes deeply the responsibility connected with the respect given him by younger punks. A friend once warned him: “these young people listen to you and they believe you, so you must act responsibly.” (Marciniak 2015: 32) Zygzak took those words to heart. He also has connections with several other contemporary Warsaw punk bands whose sound he appreciates. New qualities can be created from this cross-generational character of the scene, which gives it a reassuring aspect not only of continuity, but also, in consequence, of permanence.

Thirty-plus year-old American punks share this outlook, as some of my informal conversations with punks in the Buffalo, New York scene indicate. A punk scene can literally go on indefinitely thanks to these intergenerational connections and cooperation. The DIY way of booking shows is just the most obvious illustration of this in action, since established bands like TZN Xenna are the ones who are booked as headliners in the more commercial venues and have influence over what band gets to “open” for them. On the US ska scene, one example of such a band that supports the development of younger local ska acts is the Slackers from New York City, who always carefully choose their opening bands. In many cases bands book shows cooperatively, especially shows in DIY venues like squats, which are more open to welcoming really young or debuting bands.

The permanence established through the interlocked connections between generations of bands in a strange way relates to the historicity of punk: its roots are in a specific time period and culture: the early 1970s in the US, when bands like the Dictators and the Ramones in New York and the electric eels in Cleveland, Ohio first emerged on their scenes. Roots and models are important to punks. But permanence is a defining quality of being punk, too. Like in Greil Marcus’ interpretation of the dadaist paradox, punk is like art born of yesterday’s crash,⁷ (Marcus 2009: 219) but it is also a contract, a debt renewed with every punk that picks up a guitar. After the situationists, Marcus proposed that “The moment of real poetry brings all the unsettled debts of history back into play.” (Marcus 1989: 24, 187) The line of descent from dada through situationism to punk has been reiterated by such scholars before me as Marcus and Jon Savage, however the link is often obscured because punks do not make that

⁷ „Dada was to be the art, and also the explosion, and then another, called up by the art of yesterday’s crash. There was to be no end to dada.” Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: The Secret History of the 20th Century*, 219 (2009 twentieth anniversary edition).

reference themselves, while they enact both dada and situationist ideas in their everyday, DIY practices, and attitude, especially because "...they entrust the thing they create with the mission of completing their personal fulfillment within their social group and in this sense creativity is revolutionary in its essence." (Vaneigem: 96) Like Vaneigem too, punks ask "Who wants a world where the guarantee of freedom from starvation means the risk of death from boredom?" (Vaneigem: 4) and answer, wary of all ideologies but "anarchy of the mind."⁸ „There are more truths in twenty-four hours of an individual's life than in all the philosophies." (Vaneigem: 6) But the link may be additionally obscured by the fact that most punks, against their better judgment, subscribe to the belief that 1977 was a mythical year zero and that the true punk subculture as they know it has no relation to whatever came before. (Marciniak 2015: xxxii)

While we should note that punk was different in the 1970s than it was in the 1980s, and it is even more different now, it has at the same time essentially stayed the same, recognizable enough to all punks everywhere, despite its evolutions and devolutions into historically relevant styles like hardcore or gutter punk. Because of that it can be argued that more than any other subculture (besides perhaps skinheads), punk is not a historical phenomenon, associated with a specific decade or generation, and yet it has a unique relationship with, and attitude toward history: indeed it is hugely implicated in it. (Marciniak 2015: 34)

What we have also seen is that although the number of punks is fluctuating and the conditions of the existence of the scene may be very much unlike those even fifteen, let alone thirty years ago, punks today are to be found in all age groups from twelve to seventy, and those that have been with the subculture for a while are adamant about staying. Kondi of Bulbulators declared: "everybody has their own story, but I will always insist that you are not a punk for a moment, you are a punk for life." Iglak, the singer of Bulbulators, agrees, ridiculing what he heard from some people: "Some people said to me, 'I was a punk too.' There is no such thing. You are either a punk for life or you never were." (Marciniak 2015: 35) The singer of Psy Wojny (Dogs of War), Falon, who is the same age as Burak, has heard similar comments from people at shows, trying to make a connection, and he always laughed in their face. "Punk is a way of thinking, and not wearing a studded leather jacket for a while." (Marciniak 2012: unpublished interview) This rock-solid permanence of self-identity may also persist because, if you trust those who were the first to reopen the debt in 1919, "dada is the only savings bank that pays interest in eternity." (Marcus 1989: 24) And if Marcus was wrong about anything at all, he was wrong to talk about punk in the past tense.⁹

⁸ "Anarchy is a state of mind and not a form of government." Grabowski, 73.

⁹ As in: "Punk was not" or "punk was." Marcus does that for example on page 82.

This is also confirmed by some of my American findings as well as informal observations of my friends who stayed in Western Europe. Punks become punks because as kids the sight of punks impressed a permanent mark on their consciousness. Simon, a child of immigrants who grew up on the Lower East Side in Manhattan, “just down the block from ABC No Rio. I was always seeing these older punks and I was like, ‘when I grow up I wanna be a punk.’” (Marciniak 2012: unpublished interview) Today Simon plays in Atruth, an anarcho-punk band based in Brooklyn, NY. Rodzyn, owner of the record label Bad Look and editor of a zine, stayed in Scotland for a while and over there he attended a show that was booked to celebrate one local skinhead’s 40th birthday. He recalls that the youngest guy in the room was 32. The scene there is also strong in numbers: according to his friend’s reports, a show in 2012 brought together 250 skins. (Marciniak 2012: unpublished interview)

Peny Dredful, author of a documentary movie about the North New Jersey punk scene, told me in our interview:

I think as you age, and as you age in the scene, or as you age in punk rock, you constantly have to navigate and negotiate what compromises you are willing to make. Because there are compromises that I just won’t... there’s things I won’t do. (...) And all the people I represent in the film, everybody is still very true to the values they had set out originally. Of course we grow up, and we have to modify things, and we have to navigate... I think my experience was, getting older, we’re less judgmental. And we’re less like „this is definitive, this is what it has to be” and I think that for it to survive, you have to welcome in other people and you have to welcome in other ideas because that’s the only way it grows and stays alive. (...) Because I was such a misfit as a kid, I would never deny somebody who’s pure of spirit to come in and share that. (...) Because back in the day, 1980, that’s the only place that opened the door to me. (Marciniak 2015: 180)

Peny understands that it took trust for the older punks in the Jersey scene to welcome her into it, and she does compare the scene to a „sanctuary” because „you can’t trust what people are gonna do. Because people just take from you.” (Marciniak 2015: 180) In a similar story from the Polish context, when Zygzak was making his first overtures to people in Remont, he remembers that Bajerka, one of the two first girls in the Warsaw crew, extended her welcome to him when no one else did and that she is responsible for introducing him to the rest. She remembers today that the crew in those days was not willing to accept newcomers easily. (Marciniak 2012: unpublished interview) Just how precious the scene is for the people in it, one can find out from Peny’s film, *Untitled Punk*. Besides being thoroughly researched, this documentary is like an oral history in that it captures the spirit of what the northern New Jersey scene is like for this community. Today, she sees punk values being passed on in the families of her friends, despite some of the compromises life has forced on them, in some cases

more weighty compromises than she herself or her family had to face. „Punk is based on the values, the values that you either drew from your scene or infused in your scene, and when you have a kid, ideally you’re supposed to be handing those values on, and I see that happening.” (Marciniak 2015: 180) As a mother of an eight-year-old boy and wife of the singer of the street punk band Niblick Henbane, she should know.

Peny Dredful’s work, although she is not featured in her documentary, can be likened to an auto-ethnography, since her thoughts are the thread that binds the various interlocking interview extracts, given body by the narrator’s voice. And as we know from Stacey Holman Jones, „autoethnographic texts are personal stories that are both constitutive and performative. (...) They are love letters - processes and productions of desire - for recognition, for engagement, and for change.” (Jones 2005: 776) But every relationship deserving to be called love is forged over years of mutual sustenance, withstanding opposing tides of danger and hardship, often caused by people from the same group out of which the relation of love has begun to form.

While there are several stories of intergenerational respect and support within the punk subculture, there also, perhaps just as many, reports of the “elders” not living up to their glorious punk pioneer days, when the kids tracked their every move. Ślepy, a punk just two years older than me who grew up in my neighborhood in Muranów, Warsaw, told me of those who came before him and how many of them have dissipated into doing heroin, became nazis, or “trash, not to confuse with punks.” (Marciniak 2012: unpublished interview) Ślepy has graduated from being just one of several football hooligan kids on the street to a point where he is recognized on the national punk scene as a guy who has supported various bands over the years despite getting older and surviving a failed romantic involvement with a punk girl from the Southwest. He has struggled to differentiate himself from those who do not in his opinion merit to be called punks, and who have perhaps evolved to think of themselves as trash, as a result of social stigmatization. A book has even been published with the title *My śmiecie* that documents the early years of a group of Warsaw skinheads next to gitowcy, Satanists, and Krishna Consciousness adepts. How far is it that names like “gutter punk” can be stretched as labels that one willingly accepts for oneself? The confusion resulting from identity crises and drug abuse, in the Polish case in the late eighties and early nineties often compounded by acute economic stress, did lead to at least one death of a kid involved in punk circles who lived in my block of flats. Ślepy has steered clear of that path and now proudly holds on to his working-class identity, which compliments his continuous involvement in punk without feeling like he is losing any self-respect.

Another instance of not falling victim to some harmful practices inside the punk world is found in the story of Nancy, who remembers being ridiculed by

punk and skinhead girls who had been in the subculture a bit longer than she had, shows that taking on a more active role led to the shaking off of that kind of mistreatment. Nancy believes that starting her first band Junkie Train has literally saved her from perpetuating a cycle of victimization of girls by other girls which was typical of the punk crowd that gathered in Pola Mokotowskie in Warsaw in the nineties, where she used to go to find acceptance but mostly found rejection and ridicule. (Marciniak 2015: 164)

* * *

It is important to keep in mind, then, that the auto-ethnographic love letters we write to our communities are a product of our faith in the pillars of those communities that still stand despite, not thanks to, the bad as well as the good in the ongoing project of building and sustaining those groups. In punk, like in other related subcultures, the elders are not saints, and even those who are still with us have a history behind them that includes dark and obscure as well as lighter chapters. I think it is all the more reason why we should appreciate the continuous involvement and contributions of those who were punk before us, since if we do not know where we came from, we will not know where we are going. Punks are passionate and meticulous about their oral histories, and some will debate for hours the finer points of politics and how punk evolved in their communities. What I also see happening these days is that bands in the scene are beginning to draw more attention to the passage of time as well as to changing scene dynamics in their lyrics.

A notable example is the latest release by the ska-punk band from Florida, Less Than Jake, where among several introspective lyrics one stands out, namely “Do The Math.”¹⁰ It opens with the words: “Do the math, because you only have so many hours left to make it count.” The song is about figuring out “what matters to me most” and “what life is really all about.” The band has been performing non-stop since 1992. They participated in the momentary resurgence of both punk and ska toward the mainstream in the 1990s and in the glory days of Warped Tour, of which they became one of the most recognizable bands. But almost 20 years have passed since their heyday and several albums and countless tours later, here they are, in roughly the same spot they started from, singing about plastic cup politics, wanting to move out of their boring old small home town, and reminiscing about the first time they ever played a certain city in the U.S. Surprisingly, perhaps, their old hits do not fade away, and they perform them with equal abandon as their new material, with the 39-year-old

¹⁰ Less Than Jake, *See The Light*, released by Fat Wreck Chords in November, 2013 (FAT916); <http://www.fatwreck.com/record/detail/916> (Accessed April 28, 2014).

Roger bouncing his long dreadlocks all over as he jumps around the stage, and as the singer Chris' face slowly balloons up just a little bit more each time from his favorite products of the proverbial local liquor store.

Also on the Polish punk ground, if we take a look at Podwórkowi Chuligani's last album, *Na pohybel!*, we will notice "Emerytura pomostowe" ("Early Retirement"), a song about early retirement benefits and how these are a scam to cheat laborers out of their rightful share of national income. Then, there is a song called "Nasza epoka" ("Our epoch"), all about the memories of growing up punk in Płock, and "Stadion bar" ("Stadium bar"), in which the speaker recollects his father's lessons on the two most important spots in his life. In the lyric to "Emerytura pomostowe," the speaker establishes himself as someone who remembers "komuna" before 1989, when "it was already clear that the worker will be stolen from," but who is at the same time well aware that the new system only gives the workers meager scraps instead of the benefits they deserve. In this way, the band establishes themselves very clearly on the side of pensioners and those approaching that age who were cheated by the power elites. "Labor rights have been forgotten long ago" is the hooligan conclusion to this statement on the condition of the Polish retirement system.

"Our epoch," on the other hand, is a memory snapshot from a time when everything seemed much simpler than it is these days, while "Stadium bar" is an attempt, ironic or invoking the trope of faux naïveté, to organize life around the alternative structure of football matches and drinking in bars. All these three songs, which count among the most outstanding tracks on the album, and others in which struggling with alcoholism, anger, and frustration caused by the closing of economic opportunities are the main themes, point to a nostalgic as well as critical approach indicative of crossing certain thresholds in life.

One threshold that the voices in all these lyrics have not crossed, however, is that of becoming the loathsome *zgredek*: an old conformist square who has given up on life. If anything, we see an older generation of punks emerging from them that is very conscious of its own shortcomings, its daily ideological and political struggles, and as sure as ever of its subcultural identity. These are not the voices of *zgredeks*, but rather of a colorful cohort of people who we can proudly call our older brothers, sisters, aunts and uncles in punk. And when we see some of them live, rocking harder than any given 20-year-old, our sense of stability and certainty grows as we return home to our own struggles reassured, knowing that there is a way in which one can continue to have an impact on one's community years into the future without compromising one's values to the conformist prison of the spectacle, "the autonomous movement of the non-living." (Debord 1977: section 2)

In this way, the importance of intergenerational relations and the continued involvement of ageing punks in their subculture are an indication of interesting

trends in the continuing development of subcultures today as a way of life offering if not worthwhile alternatives, than at least a viable, time-tested avenue for the expression of alternative points of view and solutions to the problems affecting the entire society. Polish punk has confronted the troubles of a moral and economic nature that predetermine the opportunities for individual development of members of the Polish society from their adolescence until middle-age and even old age today. It has confronted these troubles not only by continuously discussing the issues at the heart of societal structure, but also by actively addressing them through direct action, organizing, and building alternative communities throughout Poland, as it previously has elsewhere in the world. With the current struggle over the nature and usage of public space being waged in Polish cities due to increasingly numerous confrontations in squatted buildings used for housing and cultural activity, the involvement of subcultures in the socio-economic development of our society has become more pronounced. The lessons that can be learned from punk elders are therefore not merely a matter of obscure academic interest, but may become a valuable resource for those not affiliated with any subcultures who are concerned about the direction in which this society is headed, and how fast.

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Relacje międzypokoleniowe i kwestia starzenia się wśród osób związanych z subkulturą punk

Streszczenie

Artykuł dotyczy kwestii starzenia się członków subkultury punk w Polsce oraz w innych krajach, z którymi polskie środowisko punk jest związane. Autorka podważa pogląd, że punków zaliczyć można do subkultur młodzieżowych, i podaje przykłady istotnego wpływu starszych członków tej subkultury, w szczególności członków zespołów i autorów tekstów. Analizuje ona stosunek młodszych punkowców do tych w wieku średnim lub starszych oraz ich oceny ciągłości subkultury i roli starszych jej członków. Podłożem teoretycznym tej analizy jest rozumienie ruchu punk m.in. przez Greila Marcusa, łączące punk z wcześniejszymi zjawiskami, jak dadaizm i sytuacjonizm, oraz z założeniami tych nurtów. Artykuł opiera się na przykładach konkret-

nych wykonawców, zakorzenionych w społecznościach punkowych w Warszawie i na Górnym Śląsku, których etnografię spisała autorka w latach 2012–2013 w kontekście transformacji gospodarczej oraz trwałych związków międzynarodowych, szczególnie pomiędzy punkami w Polsce i w USA oraz Wielkiej Brytanii. W społecznościach tych zaobserwować można przykłady systematycznego wyrażania szacunku do punkowej „starszyny,” zarówno tej z podwórka, jak i z dalszych regionów, w ramach określonych praktyk międzynarodowej kultury DIY. Omówione są też formy czynnego udziału tejże „starszyny” w kształtowaniu poglądów i praktyk składających się na esencję punk rocka.

Główne pojęcia: starzenie się; punk; subkultura; relacje międzypokoleniowe; tożsamość; tradycja; kultura DIY.