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## **Punk v. Politics**

**A Study on the Influence of the Political Landscape on the Development of Punk(rock)  
in the United States**

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## Abstract

Music and politics have always been intertwined. Something that can be seen very clearly in the world of punk rock. This loud and aggressive style of music is politically loaded and often very critical of the political establishment. Yet, how exactly do politics and punk influence one another? This thesis aims to determine how the political landscape in the United States has influenced the development of punk music. In this context punk is defined as a broad ideology, which is more than just its musical component. It entails music, fashion, and lifestyle, and is often expressed through sharp tongued lyrics. To test the hypothesis that the developments of the political landscape have influenced the development of punk music, and shifted its criticism from American individuals towards the American government and powerful institutions, case studies were done on two important and influential punk songs: *Holiday in Cambodia* by the Dead Kennedys, and *The Decline* by NOFX. Within these case studies the main focus lied on the lyrical aspects of the songs. Even though there is much more to examine, in the scope of this research this was not possible.

The results showed that in the song *Holiday in Cambodia* the main recipients of the criticism were in fact American citizens for their ignorance of atrocities happening in Cambodia. Whereas in *The Decline* this criticism shifts towards the American government and influential institutions such as the church and the NRA. This is most likely the result of major political events, which lowered the trust in the government. Thus, it can be concluded that the development of punk music can be influenced by developments on the political landscape.

## Key Words

Punk (rock) – Politics – Protest Music – Nihilism – Cultural Critique

## 1. Introduction

Punk music has been, ever since it hit the musical scene, been controversial. This controversiality is inherently connected to the characteristics of punk music. It is loud, aggressive, and utterly political. Even though, it is said to have died at the end of the 1970s, punk is still very much alive to this day.

### 1.1 Punk v. Politics

From its beginning in the 1970s up until now the US has known quite lot of influential punk bands. From the early bands such as The Ramones, The Stooges, and the Patti Smith Group, to contemporary groups such as Green Day, Sum 41 and Pennywise, since its origin in the 1970s punk cannot be left of the musical stage. At the core of punk music lie the principles of anti-establishment, anarchy, and anti-capital. Yet, for contemporary bands, quickly becoming more and more popular this puts them in a difficult spot. Question such as, are you still punk if you make a lot of money from your music arise. Some bands are even referred to as sell-outs. How did the punk scene develop to this over the years.

Music and politics have always been related. From ancient songs that celebrated leaders and politicians, to protest songs in the 1960s. Punk music is no different from this. It is, and has always been political. Yet, how do politics and punk music relate to one another? In this thesis the relation between punk and politics is researched. The main focus is on how different developments in the political field have influenced the development of punk music in the United States. Even though punk is often seen as a British concept, the scope of this research is focused on the US punk scene.

This has resulted in the following research question:

*How does the political landscape influence the development of punk music in the US?*

### 1.2 Hypothesis

It is expected that the political landscape does influence the development of punk music, since punk music is an extremely political music genre. It is often an anti-establishment expression. I expect that political events and actions have shifted punk music from a critique on the American society as a whole and on American citizens specifically, towards a critique centered on the American government. Therefore, in the early days of

punk, I expect punk lyrics to be harsher towards individual actions, whereas in the 2000s they shift to a harsher stance against the collective.

### 1.3 Outline

After this introduction, in chapter 2, the connection between music and politics will be explained. Punk will be defined for the scope of this research and theory on how punk and politics are related is elaborated. Next to that, the academic relevance of the subject is explained, just as the methodology used to be able to answer the research question.

In chapter 3 a look will be taken into the development of punk and politics in the 1970s. A short side step will be made to the transatlantic relations between British and American punk, before diving into the major political events of the decade. A musical overview will be given in which the emergence of punk is discussed and the influence of important bands is elaborated. Finally, a case study on the song *Holiday in Cambodia* provides us with an in depth examination of the influence of political events on punk music, and the reaction the music has to these events.

In chapter 4 the focus shifts to the development of punk and politics around the turn of the century. Once again, a political overview of the most important events will be given before we dive into the developments of punk music and its most influential groups of that time. The relation between punk and politics in this more recent time is examined through the case study of the song *The Decline*.

Finally, chapter 5 is the conclusion of this research and in it an answer to the research question will be formulated and the hypothesis will be checked.

## 2. Music and Politics

Music and politics have always been somewhat intertwined. Especially punk music is politically loaded. Fast and loud songs to protest the political landscape, society, or anything for that matter. However, to be able to study the connection between punk music and politics, it is necessary to define what punk music is. In this chapter, first a definition of punk will be given. After which the recent academic research is discussed. Third, a theoretical framework on the connection of music and politics is given. Finally, the methodology for this research is discussed.

### 2.1 Defining Punk

Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines punk rock<sup>1</sup> as “rock music marked by extreme and often deliberately offensive expressions of alienation and social discontent” (“punk rock”). Although this is a good start, and includes some of the core ideas of punk, yet it is too narrow of a definition to describe a movement as broad as punk. Punk arose in the United States around the late 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This first wave of punk was followed by many new waves later on. “Each new wave of punk has arrived on the cusp of, or in response to, roiling change within different aspect of society” (Stewart 6). This way it seems that with every controversy, big change, or event in society a new wave of punk emerged. Yet the one thing these waves had in common was their attitude. Punk, in the basis is loud, anti-establishment, and within the scene there is a general idea of rebellion. Through their lyrics, music and style, punk bands express their disagreement with aspects of society. For example, amongst the first wave of punk bands, the DIY attitude was quite popular. It was a way of protesting, in their eyes, money centered record labels. Thus it became popular to record music under your own label, or smaller independent labels. This ideology still remains popular within the punk scene today. Many songs are about not fitting in, changing the system, and being looked down upon. Starr and Waterman describe punk as “both the apotheosis and the ultimate exploitation of rock 'n' roll as a symbol of rebellion” (435). However, punk cannot be seen solely as a music genre. The punk ‘movement’ is much broader than that. Fashion plays a big role in the punk scene. It is not hard to imagine punk rock fashion, as Motörhead front man Lemmy sang about The Ramones: “black leather, knee hole pants” (R.A.M.O.N.E.S. 0:12). The Ramones in that sense might have been the epitome of early punk fashion, they always wore ripped blue jeans, sneakers and black leather jackets.

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<sup>1</sup> In this research “punk” and “punk rock” are considered interchangeable terms.

Through this style, punks expressed their ideology. They would not fit in with the, in their eyes boring and odious, mainstream style of wearing suits and ‘decent’ clothing that should not stand out. In this way, the punk style was a way of protesting fashion status symbols (Rubinstein 13). Later on punk fashion grew out to be much more diverse. It became a mixture of different colors, patterns and fabrics. In a sense, it became even more expressive. Colorful patches were sewn to the jeans and jackets and tattoos became a fashion ‘object’. Hairstyles changed drastically as well. From the modest, ‘rebellious’ hairstyles The Ramones wore, hairstyles became much more colorful as well. Punks started dyeing their hair, and were creating big spikes and mohawks. The sight of a British punk rock festival in 1976, where amongst other the Sex Pistols, The Damned, and The Clash Performed, is vividly described by Wicke:

“They stood there dressed up in the discarded fashion of previous decades, in pieces of uniform and ladies’ underwear cut into rags and held together with safety pins, with their hair dyed green, red or purple, hung about with razor blades, bicycle chains and toilet chains, wearing iron-studded dog collars around their necks, out sized safety pins through their cheeks and multi-colored make up on their faces, pestering the passers-by and spreading an atmosphere of aggression” (136).

Thus, it is clear that punk is so much more than “rock music marked by extreme and often deliberately offensive expressions of alienation and social discontent” (“punk rock”). It is a movement, an ideology, which is expressed through music, clothing, lifestyle and sharp tongued lyrical force.

## **2.2 Connecting Music and Politics**

Now knowing what punk is its essence entails, it is important to establish how music and politics are connected. That music and politics are connected is quite clear. A simple example is protest music. This is music in which some situation is protested, and is practically always politically loaded. On the other hand there is censorship. This is a political (abuse of) power, which can be used to silence protesters, which in this example would use music as a protest. However, you can go even further, and see music and politics not as “separate entities whose worlds collide only occasionally, but rather are extensions of each other” (Street 10). In this case this means that punk music is not just a way to deliver the politically loaded lyrics, the punk music in itself is politically loaded. The nihilistic, sometimes even aggressive sounds of punks music can, just as the lyrics, be seen as an expression of political



standpoints. Looking at the connection between music and politics in this way, thus means that the punk scene is very much connected to politics in all its aspects. From the rips in your blue jeans, to distorted guitar riffs, and from the safety pin through your ear, to your black leather jacket. Everything the punk scene entails is a vehicle through which the political attitude of resistance to the established political powers is expressed.

To be able to determine how the political landscape in the United States has influenced the development of punk music it is important to gain an historical overview of the development of the punk scene in the United States. So first the rise of punk in the late 1960s and early 1970s must be examined. Even though the focus clearly lies on punk in the United States, the relation between British and American punk is important to discuss. For many argue that the United Kingdom is the birthplace of punk. Therefor it is essential to look into the transatlantic development of punk. In that context the big political issues of the 1970s (for example the Vietnam War), can be linked to the development of punk.

However, it is also necessary to examine recent developments in the relation between punk and politics in the United States. Some argue that the golden age of punk has been long gone (Starr and Waterman 434), yet the punk scene is still very much active. Through modern methods of distribution, it might even be able to reach its biggest audience yet. Therefor it is equally important to examine the recent events in the political landscape that influenced the development of punk music in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### 2.3 Academic Relevance

Many works have been written on the subject of punk. Mostly on the anti-establishment part of the movement<sup>2</sup>, or the cultural aspects of the scene<sup>3</sup>. Even though some work has been written on the intersection between music and politics, not a lot has been written solely on the relation between punk and politics, and how politics influences the development of punk music. Even though the punk scene might not be in such a spotlight as in the late 1970s, it might be more relevant today than a few years ago. In recent years around Europe and the US authoritarian tendencies have come up in the political landscape. Take for example the Polish and Hungarian governments in Europe, or the Trump administration in the US. This has led to a massive decline in political trust, especially amongst young people

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Grimes, M., and Dines, M., editors. *Punk Now!!: Contemporary Perspectives on Punk*. Chicago, IL, The University of Chicago Press, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> See for example Wicke, P. *Rock Music. Culture, Aesthetics and Sociology*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

(Chevalier 427). Therefore, it is very interesting to see how political developments influence the punk scene. Especially since the punk scene has ever been anti-establishment, just as anti-authoritarian. This decline in political trust, and rise of authoritarian traits, might just spark new developments in the punk scene.

## 2.4 Methodology

To be able to answer the research question, a closer look must be taken into both the musical development of punk and the political developments in the US.

In chapter 3 the beginning of the punk scene in the US in the 1970s will be analyzed. First, an introduction on the rise of punk music will be given, in which a short sidestep to punk in the United Kingdom will be made. However, due to the scope of this thesis, it is not possible to give an in dept analyses on the British punk scene. Second, an overview of the political landscape will be given, in which the most important political events will be discussed. Third, an overview of the musical developments surrounding the punk scene in the 1970s will be given. Finally, through a deep dive into the case study of *Holiday in Cambodia* by the Dead Kennedys, an assessments can be made of the relation between politics and punk. The case study in this research will mainly focus on the lyrical aspects of the song. Even though punk (or any music for that matter) is much more than just the lyrics (fashion, music videos, art work, etc.), due to the scope of this research it is not possible to analyze every single aspect.

In chapter 4 a closer look will be taken into the relation between punk and politics into the new millennium. First, a political overview will be given comprising the most important events from the turn of the millennium until roughly 2010. Second, a musical overview will be given on the punk scene in the 2000s. Punk is said to be dead, yet is this truly the case? Third, a closer look will be taken into the case study of the song *The Decline* by NOFX. Just as the case study for *Holiday in Cambodia*, this case study will mainly focus on the lyrical aspects of *The Decline*.

Through this methodology it is able to elaborate and compare the first developments of punk music in the US and recent developments in the punk scene. This way, it is able to answer the question as to how the political landscape influences the development of the punk scene.

### 3. Punk in the 1970s: The Rise of a New Scene

In the early 1970s a new genre shook the musical world – you could almost say literally – on its foundations. Punk was born. With the coming of groups such as The Ramones, The Sex Pistols, and The Heartbreakers, a new, loud and aggressive style of music reached the ears of millions of listeners worldwide. In this chapter the rise of the punk scene in the US, will be discussed. The 1970s were eventful years politically speaking, and this helped speed up the development of punk. First, a political overview of the 1970s in the US will be given. After which the first wave of punk will be discussed. Finally, the song *Holiday in Cambodia* (1980) by the Dead Kennedys will be explored in depth.

Even though the scope of this research limits an in depth discussion on the development of punk music across the Atlantic Ocean, a short side step must be made to the UK. It is important to keep in mind that the punk scene in the UK developed around the same time as the punk scene in the US. This was a worldwide phenomenon. It is especially important since Great Britain is often seen as the birthplace of punk music. With the appearance of The Sex Pistols and The Clash in the late 1970s the musical industry in the UK was shocked. Yet, why was the UK the place for those bands to spring to life? What made their music so aggressive and against the grain? To answer these questions, many aspects of British society must be taken into account. Grimes and Dines mention amongst others the May '68 student protests in France, several union strikes in the UK during the 1970s, Margaret Thatcher becoming Prime Minister of the UK and the rise of far right groups (Page Number). There was a lot of unrest across Europe at that time. In the UK there was a sense of dissatisfaction with how things went. Thus arose perhaps the most notorious punk band of all time: The Sex Pistols.

Although short lived, the Sex Pistols, made an enormous mark on musical history. Founded in 1975, they came out 'pistols' blazing. Known for their aggressive performances, they quickly became (in)famous. Even though the influence for Malcolm McLaren to create the band came out of the US, the punk group he created became known as quintessentially English (Wicke 138). The band was anarchistic and anti-establishment. In this, they reached a peak with their song *God Save The Queen* (1977). The song was released during the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's reign, and caused an uproar throughout the UK. The song was banned by the BBC and most other radio stations (Leigh). The influence of The Sex Pistols and their idea of anarchy are crucial to keep in mind while studying anything punk related.

### 3.1 Political Overview of the 1970s

Just as in the UK, the 1970s was an eventful decade in the US. Politically a lot happened during that time. Starting with the Vietnam War. Since the late 1950s and early 1960s the US was drawn into the Vietnam War. Especially in the late 1960s President Johnson expanded the presence of US troops in Vietnam, this massive commitment, along with Operation Rolling Thunder (an enormous bombing program) Americanized the war (Norton et al. 777). Being the “first televised” war, the American people at home could follow relatively closely what was going on in Vietnam, and how the US acted (Norton et al. 778). This created a major division between the American people. Many people supported the war effort, since they were worried about the spread of Communism, and many people opposed the war effort, because of the way the US Army used carpet bombing, napalm and crop defoliants to try and win the war (Norton et al. 778). Especially amongst the younger generations the opposition against the war was very strong. When in 1968 Nixon was elected President, he promised to end the war. Sure enough, Nixon did withdraw troops, however, he also decided to bomb a neutral Cambodia and Laos. This spiked anti-war protests, and enlarged the divisions in US society. When in 1975, twenty years after its beginning, the Vietnam War ended, it had cost the lives of 58,000 Americans and between 1.5 and 2 million Vietnamese (Norton et al. 801). What was left, was a nation divided on the course of action. Many Americans were perplexed and quite frankly outraged that the domino effect, *the* reason why the US joined the war, that was supposed to overtake all of South East Asia, never happened (Nye and Welch 168).

All the while, in October 1973, the Arab members of OPEC imposed an oil embargo on the US, as opposition to the US’ support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War (Norton et al. 804). This resulted in major spikes in gas prices, runs on gasoline, shortages and endless lines at gas stations. When the embargo was lifted in March 1974, gas prices stayed high, and the embargo was felt by Americans for the better part of the decade. But most of all, it became clear to everyone that “as the dependence of the United States economy on Arab oil increased, its economic interests would be increasingly prejudiced by its foreign policy” (Penrose 136-137). Americans were thrown off by this new reality, since one of the core values of America was the American Dream. Work hard, and you can achieve everything. As an American you controlled your economic destiny. However, the oil crisis, and lingering economic crisis made abundantly clear that “Americans no longer fully controlled their own economic destiny” (Norton et al. 804).

During the 1972 elections the faith of Americans in their government and the office of President of the United States took a hit. Even though Nixon almost was not able to lose his reelection in 1972, he had become more and more paranoid during his years as President. He was obsessed with the idea that he was surrounded by enemies (Norton et al. 807). During the presidential campaign of 1972, this became so bad, Nixon used a group of initiates to tip the scales in his favor. Amongst other things they were “bugging phones, infiltrating campaign staffs, writing anonymous letters falsely accusing Democratic candidates of sexual misconduct, and [bugging] the Democratic National Offices ... at the Watergate complex” (Norton et al. 807). Although Nixon was not directly involved in the Watergate bugging, he tried to cover up the scandal, instead of distancing himself from any form of misconduct. This would have led to the inescapable impeachment and conviction of Nixon, had he not resigned the office of President. These scandals absolutely shook the confidence American citizens had in the government on its foundations.

During this decade, filled with social unrest, confusion and anger about a lost – and often seen as unjust – war, economical hardship, and distrust of the government, punk music found an extremely fertile soil in which it could sprout.

### **3.2 The First Wave of Punk in the United States**

Punk music first came to light in the US in the 1970s. It was an alternative to the main stream rock and roll that became popular in the late 1950s and 1960s. It was loud, aggressive, and hit the musical world like a truck. In the US, for many people, punk started with The Ramones and the Patti Smith Group (Lentini 158). These New York based bands paved the way for many more punk groups to come. An extremely important, and well known venue for the establishment of the punk scene in New York was the CBGB's. The club was an important actor for beginning punk rock bands to show their authenticity. This was essential for the development of the scene, since authenticity is “attributed to [the punk scene's] fundamental attachment to various subcultures” (Rosenthal 143). Meaning, this way the scene was able to pull in many different groups and subcultures under the flag of punk, boosting its popularity. Thus, through this stage the early New York punk bands were able to bind big numbers of people to them.

Through this, the punk culture was born. People started dyeing their hair in bright colors, wearing ripped jeans, leather jackets and safety pins (Wicke 136). And all of them started to kick against the shins of the establishment. The angry, heartfelt and political lyrics

found its way to the ears of many Americans and within the punk music they could ventilate the problems they had with politics and share their own ideas. The political unrest of the 1970s created an expedited development of the punk scene, since many people came to distrust the American government, and felt unheard by their representatives. This process was even more sped up by the Transatlantic exchange of American and British punk music (Lentini 154).

The development of the punk scene in New York was in itself a catalyzer for the development of punk across America. Soon Los Angeles and Seattle became vivid punk scenes as well. Yet, however fast the punk scene came up, it did start to dissolve. It was as early as 1978 that Steve Ignorant, singer of the band Crass, sang “Yes, that’s right, punk is dead” (Punk is Dead 0:10). Ignorant believed that punk had become too mainstream, that it was no longer pure and had become just a means to make money. A few years later, in 1985, The magazine Rolling Stone stated that “primal punk is passé” (Goldberg 1985). At that time The Sex Pistols were dissolved, The Ramones had become mainstream, so one could tend to believe Steve Ignorant that punk had in fact died. Yet, with the ending of the first wave of punk in the late 1970s, and early 1980s, many different subcultures and subgenres of punk emerged.

### **3.3 Case Study: *Holiday In Cambodia***

To be able to see the relation between punk and politics in the 1970s, a closer look will be taken to the song *Holiday in Cambodia* by the Dead Kennedys. The lyrics to the song can be found in Appendix A. The Dead Kennedys, formed in 1978, is a San Francisco based punk band. The band is known for its politically loaded lyrics and criticism towards the US government. Their lyrics are often sharp tongued and sarcastic, and their artwork (album covers, music videos etc.) controversial. The song came out in 1980 on their debut album *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables*. *Holiday in Cambodia* is about the Khmer Rouge regime under leadership of Pol Pot in Cambodia between 1975 and 1979. This totalitarian regime was responsible for the death of over one and a half million Cambodians – over 20% of the Cambodian population (Hinton 1). The Khmer Rouge regime and the genocide on the Cambodian people are relatively unknown. The US at the time did not want to intervene, afraid of a second war such as the one in Vietnam.

The Dead Kennedys, in the song, are very critical of the American people, and especially young Americans. They accuse these young Americans of not knowing what is

going on: “So, you’ve been to school for a year or two, and you know you’ve seen it all”. This is a sharp accusation to the American people that they are unaware of the atrocities that happened in Cambodia. Yet, at the same time, through this sentence, the song is critical of the American Capitalist system. Privileged US citizens, who were able to go to school, are supposedly not able to fully grasp the suffering of the poor inhabitants of the third world. The main (sarcastic) solution offered in the song, is for these rich, college-going Americans, to take a holiday in Cambodia, to find out what atrocities are happening there and to be able to truly understand the suffering of the Cambodian people: “It’s time to taste what you most fear, Right Guard will not help you here. Brace yourself my dear. It’s a holiday in Cambodia, it’s tough kid but it’s life”. Lead singer Jello Biafra suggests that these privileged Americans visit Cambodia to find out how it really is to be amongst the suffering people of the world. Right Guard is a brand of deodorant, which is used symbolically to show that nothing can cover up the stench of the events happening in Cambodia. At the same time Biafra is extremely critical of the way the capitalist system is working in the US. “Kiss ass while you bitch, so you can get rich, but your boss gets richer off you.” Here he is critical of the way the American people now only seem to be able to care about making money and are fine with lying and using people, just to become rich. Yet, Biafra also accuses the rich Americans of not knowing what it is like to work hard, they just gain their richer by profiting off of others: “Well, you’ll work harder with a gun in your back, for a bowl of rice a day”.

Even though the song is critical towards the US government for the bombings of Cambodia during the Vietnam War – the official music video shows images of US helicopters bombing Cambodian villages with napalm –, and the neglect of the genocide by the Pol Pot regime in the years after the Vietnam War, the main problem the Dead Kennedys have is with the American society. Sure, there was a massive distrust in the US government, especially after the Vietnam War and the Watergate Scandal, yet still it was American society that needed to be changed most. It was about changing the way in which the American society saw the world.

## 4. Contemporary Punk Politics

Even though Crass announced punk to be dead in 1978, throughout the years have kept revering to themselves as punk. In this chapter the relation between punk and politics after the turn of the millennium will be discussed. First, an overview of political events in the 2000s will be discussed. Second, a musical overview will be given. And finally, the NOFX song *The Decline* will provide a case study into the contemporary politics of punk music.

### 4.1 Political Overview of the 2000s

Just as the 1970s, the 2000s were a politically eventful and important decade. Many (internationally) important events occurred in the US, that fed the lyrics of countless punk bands. One of the most important, and a catalyzer for other events, were the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Four commercial airplanes were hijacked and two were used to crash into the World Trade Center in New York City and the third was used to crash into the Pentagon in Arlington. In the fourth plane passengers tried to overtake the hijackers, yet the plane still crashed in Pennsylvania, killing all aboard (Norton et al. 861). The terrorist act on 9/11 was the most deadly on American soil, killing more than three thousand people. The terrorist group that claimed responsibility for the attack was Al Qaeda (Norton et al. 862). President Bush reacted forcefully on the attacks by proclaiming America's 'war on terrorism'. Sure enough, within three months American special forces had driven Taliban and Al Qaeda leaders from power in Afghanistan (Norton et al. 862).

One very important decision that Bush made following the 9/11 attacks was that "the United States would not wait for a potential security threat to become real; it would strike first" (Norton et al. 863). Meaning that even is the United Nations disapproved of military action, the US would do so anyway, to protect itself. This in its turn resulted in the invasion of Saddam Husseins Iraq. The Bush administration claimed that Iraq was in possession of weapons of mass destruction, and was trying to create nuclear weapons. However, this was never proven to be true (Norton et al. 863). Even after a US resolution to the UN, issuing an ultimatum to Iraq, did not pass, the Bush administration went on with it anyways. In March of 2003 the US, with aid of, amongst others, the UK, started the invasion of Iraq. One of the biggest problems was that Bush had not thought his plan through. After Iraq was invaded and occupied by US forces, the next step was not thought through. This led to critique towards the Bush administration of people who were in favor of the Iraq invasion (Norton et al. 864). In



the end, Iraq was left in a state of civil war, and Bush received international critique for his aggressive foreign policy, and even threatening world peace (Norton et al. 866).

Not just internationally did problems arise for the US, domestically problems were stacking up as well. This came to a peak in the financial crisis of 2008. In the years before that a financial ‘housing bubble’ had arisen. People who, before regulations had been let go, would not have been able to get a mortgage, were now able to get mortgages at high rates. This resulted in ever rising prices for houses. When someone was not able to afford their expensive mortgage, the house could easily be sold for high profits. Wall Street played into this situation, and created extremely complex investment packages. This construction started to fail around 2007, since more and more people were not able to afford their mortgage any longer. People started selling their houses en masse, which resulted in plummeting property values. Home-owners, banks, and investment groups were now stuck with mortgages which were bigger than the value of the property. This created a world wide recession, and banks across the globe were on the verge of collapsing (Norton et al. 868). This resulted in a financial crisis that hit the American people hard. Many Americans lost their house and their jobs. The Bush administration tried to fix the crisis by bailing out big financial institutions and banks, which led to anger from the working class American citizens. They were “angry that tax dollars rescued wealthy bankers on ‘Wall Street’” (Norton et al. 868).

All in all, it was an eventful decade, in which the discussion of foreign intervention flared up once again. Just as with Vietnam, public approval and government trust fell, when it turned out Iraq did not have the weapons of mass destruction. Next to that, the financial crisis put a strain on especially lower and middle class Americans, creating big divisions in American society, and feeding inequality.

## **4.2 Punk’s Not Dead**

As seen in chapter 3 punk had risen very quickly, yet was declared dead soon after. However punk music, ever since its inception, never left the scene. As a reaction to Crass’s *Punk is Dead*, The Exploited sang in 1981 “Punk’s not dead!” (Punk’s Not Dead 0:17). Sure enough during the 1980s and 1990s many punk bands rose to popularity, and became more and more mainstream. Among those are examples such as The Offspring (1984), Bad Religion (1980) and Green Day (1987). Even though punk apparently was not dead, this exact popularity of the genre became a discussion on if these band were still even punk. Many bands started to use the image of aggression and disobedience, since record companies were

able to sell it relatively easy. This paradoxically creates an anti-punk image. As Graffin states: “because it is so easy for record companies to sell images of violence, sex, and self-importance, many bands have taken the bait and portrayed themselves as punks, without realizing that they were actually perpetrating a stereotype of conformity that is wholly un-punk” (Graffin, qtd. in Butler 211). This process is leading in the punk discussions around the turn of the millennium. Popular punk bands, often referred to as being in the subgenre of pop punk, are criticized for being sell outs, whereas the more idealistically punk bands seem to fade away.

Thus, pop punk bands became more and more popular in the 2000s, through which their political views were spread wider and wider. However, there was a downside to this. The more politically loaded, truly punk bands, were not as popular as the less politically loaded bands. Sure, Green Day and Sum 41 expressed political views through their lyrics, but it was in no way as straight forward as the Dead Kennedys did in the 1970s and 1980s. However, one extremely popular band has always remained very political: NOFX. NOFX rose to popularity in the 1990s and is still one of the most popular punk bands to this day. In 2003 NOFX released their album ‘War on Errorism’, which was their reaction to the Bush administrations War on Terrorism (NOFX 2003). The album cover features a caricature of President Bush as a clown.<sup>4</sup> Next to this, NOFX led the charge against President Bush during the Presidential elections of 2004. With organization ‘Rock against Bush’ NOFX, together with other influential punk bands, tried to stop Bush from being reelected by trying to get people to vote against him. At the core of this campaign were the albums *Rock Against Bush, Vol. 1* and *Vol. 2* (Fat Wreck Chords 2004). So, even though these bands were seen by some as mainstream and sell outs, they remained true to their punk ideology and political activism. Thus, it is clear that even though, the political aspect of popular punk bands is fading, it still is present amongst some popular punk bands.

#### 4.3 Case Study: *The Decline*

To be able to see the relation between punk and politics around the turn of the millennium, a closer look will be taken to the song *The Decline* by NOFX. The lyrics to the song can be found in Appendix B. Released in 1999 *The Decline* is an over 18 minutes long critique on the way the US is functioning. It is one of the most interesting punk songs ever

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix C.

made, since one of the characteristics of punk songs, is that they are very short. For example, most Ramones songs are around two minutes long. *The Decline* almost gives of a vibe of a classic rock opera, yet it is fundamentally different. The song criticized almost every fundamental way in which the US is functioning. It starts off with the patriotism that is fed to the American people by the government and creates a feeling of elitism over people from other countries: “Bred on purple mountain range, feed amber waves of grains. To lesser human beings, zero feeling”. This is a reaction to American exceptionalism, which has always been present in the US, yet according to NOFX is forced onto Americans by the government. The song also criticizes the capitalist system in the US. “Blame it on the greedocracy” refers to the fact that capitalism encourages egocentric behavior, which results in people only wanting to enrich their selves. NOFX through this advocates for a more equal society, in which every American can get the same opportunities.

In the next passage the song criticizes the US gun laws, “Father what have I done ... A kill is why we breed”. In this passage the government is accused of creating ‘killing machines’ through the gun laws. Since it is so easy to obtain a fire arm in the US, even children grow up cherishing them. NOFX also expresses their disagreement with the inconsistencies of drug legislation in the US: “A dime is worth a lot more in Detroit. A dime in California, a twenty dollar fine”. Where it is addressed that the penalties for possession of illegal substances varies greatly between states, and therefore some Americans are being punished by their government much harder than others. This creates a major inequality amongst US citizens. The song goes on to comment on how the opposition is silenced by the government and use of popular media. “The man who used to speak, performs a cute routine” refers to the opposition, people who were able to stand up against the government, having given up, and consoling in the fact that they are not able to bring change. This, supposedly, is done through the use of television. “The television’s put a thought inside your head ... A symphonic blank stare”. This means people are being brain washed by televisions, until all that is left is an obedient blank stare.

The song ends on the note that the American people are very well aware of the decline of their country, yet they are numbed to the idea of standing up for their rights. Thus, are accepting of their fate of living in decline: “And so we go, on with our lives ... Why would anyone stick out their neck?”.

When comparing this song to *Holiday in Cambodia* by the Dead Kennedys something remarkable becomes clear. Whereas the Dead Kennedys mainly critiqued the American

people, NOFX shifts the blame toward the US government. Even though individuals are held accountable for their own actions and inability to stand up, NOFX is devastating in their judgement of the US government. Here it is clear that all political events and scandals have led to a loss of trust in politics, which is expressed in *The Decline*.

## 5. Conclusion

As stated in the very beginning of this thesis, punk and politics are connected. Punk can be defined as a music genre that is loud, anti-establishment, and with a general idea of rebellion. Yet the punk scene is much more than just the musical component. It can almost be seen as an ideology, a way of living. Not just music, but fashion, culture, and politics are essential aspects of the punk scene. Yet, through every aspect of being punk a form of protest can be established. From singing a protest song to the punk fashion such as ripped jeans and leather jackets. Through this ideology punk is very much connected to politics. Not simply through the politically loaded lyrics, but also through the music itself. The loud, aggressive, and nihilistic music style in itself is an expression of the ideology of the punk scene.

Punk arose in the US in the 1970s, right around the same time as punk arose in the UK. Both branches of punk were heavily influenced by each other, when bands such as The Ramones toured the UK, and the Sex Pistols toured the US. The 1970s in the US was an eventful decade, which created great conditions for punk music to develop. The Vietnam War was at its peak in the early 1970s and by 1975 the US had lost the war. The American people were shocked by the atrocities of the Vietnam War, and found out that the reasons the US intervened turned out to be false. At the same time, in the late 1970s the US fell into an economical oil crisis. Many Americans were hit hard, and lost their jobs or even homes. A proverbial cherry on top of this sundae of social and economical unrest, was the Watergate scandal and the following impeachment of President Nixon. Americans lost their faith in their government. At this time punk came out blasting, and quickly spread around the US. As seen in the case study of *Holiday in Cambodia* the US government was blamed a lot, yet interestingly a lot of the critique in punk music was aimed at the American citizen. They were blamed for not knowing what was going on, and not being aware of their privileged positions. Even though there was certainly criticism directed towards the American government for their actions in South East Asia, it is notable that a large component of the criticism is directed toward American individuals.

Around the turn of the millennium the punk scene had developed quite a bit. A discussion was going on whether or not punk still existed, since many of the big and influential bands were seen as mainstream sell outs, something that is inherently un-punk. Yet, of these influential bands, some still were extremely political and popular at the same time. At the same time the 2000s were filled with important political events. From the 9/11

terrorist attacks and the following War on Terrorism, to the financial crisis that hit the American lower and middle classes extremely hard. As seen in the case study of *The Decline* the focus of the criticism had shifted from mainly towards American citizens, towards the American government and big institutions such as the church or the NRA. Within the punk scene the faith in the government vanished even more than in earlier decades.

Thus, it can be said that the political landscape with all its events very much influenced the development of punk music. Through several events punk's critiques shifted from US citizens towards US institutions and the US government. Sure, critique towards individuals still is, and probably always will be part of punk. However, it is remarkable to see the difference between the cases of the Dead Kennedys and NOFX.

All in all, it can be said that even a music genre as nihilistic as punk is subject to change, and this change is influenced by the developments in the political landscape. So in the immortal words of The Exploited front man Wattie Buchan:

“Punk's not dead!”

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## 6. Appendices

### Appendix A

Lyrics to *Holiday in Cambodia* by The Dead Kennedys.

So, you've been to school for a year or two  
And you know you've seen it all  
In daddy's car, thinking you'll go far  
Back east your type don't crawl  
Playing ethnicky jazz to parade your snazz  
On your five-grand stereo  
Braggin' that you know, how the niggers feel cold  
And the slums got so much soul  
It's time to taste what you most fear  
Right Guard will not help you here  
Brace yourself, my dear  
Brace yourself, my dear  
It's a holiday in Cambodia  
It's tough, kid, but it's life  
It's a holiday in Cambodia  
Don't forget to pack a wife  
You're a star-belly snitch, you suck like a leech  
You want everyone to act like you  
Kiss ass while you bitch, so you can get rich  
But your boss gets richer off you  
Well, you'll work harder with a gun in your back  
For a bowl of rice a day  
Slave for soldiers till you starve  
Then your head is skewered on a stake  
Now you can go where people are one  
Now you can go where they get things done  
What you need, my son...  
What you need, my son...

Is a holiday in Cambodia

Where people dress in black

A holiday in Cambodia

Where you'll kiss ass or crack

Pol Pot, Pol Pot

Pol Pot, Pol Pot

Pol Pot, Pol Pot

Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot

Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot

Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol Pot

Pol Pot, Pol Pot, Pol...

And it's a holiday in Cambodia

Where you'll do what you're told

A holiday in Cambodia

Where the slums got so much soul

Pol Pot!

**Appendix B**

Lyrics to *The Decline* by NOFX.

Where are all the stupid people from?  
And how did they get to be so dumb,  
Bred on purple mountain range,  
Feed amber waves of grains  
To lesser human beings,  
Zero feelings  
Blame it on  
Human nature,  
Man's destiny  
Blame it on the greedocracy  
The fear of god,  
The fear of change,  
Fear of truth.  
Add the bill of rights subtract the wrongs  
Memorize and sing star spangled songs  
There's no answers when the questions aren't ever asked is anybody learning from the past,  
We're living in united stagnation  
Father...what have I done,  
I took that 22,  
A gift for me from you,  
To bed with me each night,  
Kept it clean,  
Polished it well,  
Cherished every cartridge every shell,  
Down,  
By the creek,  
Under brush,  
Under dirt there's a carcass of my second kill,  
Down,  
At the park,  
Under stone,

Under pine there's the carcass of my brother William.  
Brother where have you gone to I swear  
I never thought I could see so many times  
They told me to shoot straight,  
Don't pull the trigger squeeze,  
That will insure a kill,  
A kill is what you want,  
A kill is why we breed.  
The Christians love their guns  
The church and NRA.  
Pray for their salvation,  
Prey on the lower faiths.  
The story book's been read and every line believed.  
The curriculum's been set logic is a threat reason searched & seized.  
Jerry spent some time in Michigan,  
A 20 year vacation after all he had a dime,  
A dime is worth a lot more in Detroit,  
A dime in California...a 20 dollar fine  
Jerry only stayed a couple months  
It's hard to enjoy yourself while bleeding out the ass  
Asphyxiation is simple and fast  
It beats 17 fun years of being someone's bitch  
Don't think,  
Drink your wine,  
Watch the fire burn,  
His problems not mine,  
Just be that model citizen.  
I wish I had a schilling,  
For every senseless killing,  
I'd buy a government.  
America's for sale,  
And you can get a good deal on it,  
And make a healthy profit,  
Or maybe tear it apart,

You start with assumption,  
That a million people are smart,  
Smarter than I  
Serotonins gone,  
She gave up,  
Drifted away.  
Sara fled thought process gone,  
She left her answering machine on,  
The greeting left spoken sincere,  
Messages no one will ever hear,  
10,000 messages a day  
A million more transmissions lay  
Victims of the laissez faire  
10,000 voices 100 guns, 100 decibels turns to one, one bullet one empty head  
Now with serotonin gone  
The man that used to speak performs a cute routine.  
Feel a little patronized.  
Don't feel bad about what they found a way inside your head.  
And you feel a bit misled.  
It's not that they don't care.  
The televisions put a thought inside your head  
Like a Barry Manilow  
Jingle I'd like to  
Teach the world to sing  
In perfect harmony  
A symphonic blank stare.  
It doesn't make you care.  
Not designed to make you care.  
They're betting you won't care.  
They'll place a wager on your greed.  
A wager on your pride  
Why try to beat them when a million others tried  
We are the whores  
Intellectually sprayed

We are the queer  
Dysfunctionally raised  
One more pill to kill the pain,  
One more pill to kill the pain,  
One more pill to kill the pain,  
Living through conformity  
One more prayer should keep us safe,  
One more prayer to keep us warm,  
One more prayer to keep us safe,  
There's gonna be a better place,  
Lost the battle  
Lost the war  
Lost the things worth living for  
Lost the will to win the fight  
One more pill to kill the pain  
The going gets tough the tough get debt  
Don't pay attention pay the rent  
Our next of kins pay for your sins  
A little faith should keep us safe  
Save us  
The human existence  
Is failing.  
Resistance essential.  
The future  
Written off.  
The odds  
Are astronomically against us only  
Moron and genius  
Would fight a losing battle  
Against the super ego  
When giving in is so damn comforting  
And so we go  
On with our lives  
We know the truth

But prefer lies lies  
Are simple.  
Simple is bliss.  
Why go against tradition when we can  
Admit defeat.  
Live in decline.  
Be the victim of our own design  
The status quo  
Built on suspect.  
Why would anyone stick out their neck  
Fellow members  
Club we've got ours,  
I'd like to introduce you to our host  
He's got his and  
I've got mine,  
We got decline

## Appendix C

Album cover of NOFX's 'War on Errorism'.

