

Book Review: Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion: The punk and post-punk worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool and Sheffield, 1975–80

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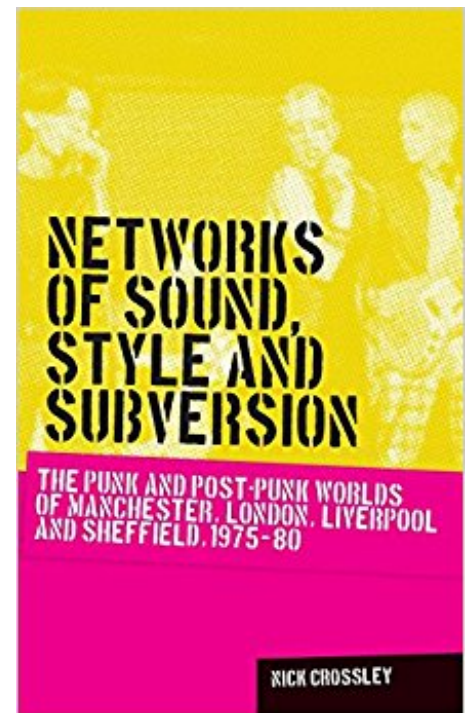
This book examines the birth of punk in the UK and its transformation, within a short period of time, into post-punk. Deploying innovative concepts of ‘critical mass’, ‘social networks’ and ‘music worlds’, and using sophisticated techniques of ‘social network analysis’, it teases out the events and mechanisms involved in punk’s ‘micro-mobilisation’, its diffusion across the UK and its transformation in certain city-based strongholds into a variety of interlocking post-punk forms. Alex Hensby thinks this is a fine piece of work; a book that is driven by the author’s palpable knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject.

Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion: The punk and post-punk worlds of Manchester, London, Liverpool and Sheffield, 1975–80. Nick Crossley. Manchester University Press. February 2015.

It might be bad form to begin a book review with praise for another, but one of my favourite reads from last year was *Clothes, Music, Boys* by Viv Albertine. As a member of the London art college/squatter scene in the mid-1970s which spawned groups such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash and her band the Slits, Albertine’s memoir offers a particularly vivid personal account of how the punk movement assembled itself. On reading, one line in particular stood out: having been invited to rehearse with Johnny Thunders’s seminal band the Heartbreakers, Albertine wrote “I was scared. But I go anyway. That should be written on my gravestone. ‘She was scared. But she went anyway’”. Among other things, her recollection neatly captures the strange attraction of subcultural movements, be they artistic, identity-based, or political. Participation can carry social risks – often requiring the recalibration of one’s values and conventions to something more subversive – yet as Albertine seemingly suggests, risk-taking is an essential part of its appeal.

A wholly satisfying coincidence, then, that the network assemblage of the UK punk and post-punk movements should be the focus of Nick Crossley’s excellent new book. Drawing on a combination of documentary evidence and social network analysis, he sets out to explain why and how these movements emerged, as well as “when, where, in the way and involving the people it did”. Punk is by no means an under-studied topic, and Crossley is understandably keen to debunk prior sociological accounts which reduce it to singular expressions of class conflict or crisis politics. Borrowing from the language of social movement studies (on which he has also written extensively), he asks that given “grievances are far more common than mobilisation”, what might be the difference between “situations where grievances occasion collective action and those where they do not?”

Of course, the answer for many music historians and biographers is to emphasise the unique contribution of certain individuals. Whilst it is difficult to imagine UK punk without, say, the snarling charisma of Johnny Rotten, Crossley does not mythologise his subject nor glorify any of its key players. Instead, he advocates a relational approach so that the complexity of subcultural worlds and multiplicity of factors that explain their formation can be more easily captured. This involves studying the interactions, relations and networks of the actors involved, including how individuals came together, what drew them together, and how they were able to create punk worlds. In this sense,



explaining *why* punk emerged is found to be indivisible from explaining *how* it emerged.



Crossley's conception of punk networks as 'worlds' draws usefully on [Howard Becker's concept of 'art worlds'](#), i.e. interactive symbolic spaces made up of networks, places, conventions and resources. Chapters five and six focus in detail on the first 'punk world' in London, where networks formed initially out of certain 'foci' such as group auditions, squats, and most famously, Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood's King's Road boutique *SEX*. These foci brought predisposed individuals together, allowing them to bond over mutual ideas and interests (be it a love for cult artists such as the New York Dolls, or *SEX*'s provocative bondage aesthetic) and strengthen interpersonal ties. Within eighteen months, these foci had coalesced into a single interlinked network, as its participants made connections, generated shared meanings and conventions, and above all, created punk music.

To explain how punk and post-punk worlds developed so quickly, Crossley again transposes concepts from social movement sociology. With the emphasis on pooling resources, creating liminal spaces free from mainstream convention, and attracting a critical mass of predisposed participants, the punk world starts to appear not unlike Occupy Wall Street. Whilst Crossley is keen to downplay any depiction of punk as a self-consciously political movement, parallels can also be drawn in its expansion from a local to national phenomenon: chapter six chronicles how punk found an unlikely moment of 'cognitive liberation' in the form of [Bill Grundy's notorious TV interview with the Sex Pistols](#). Together with the band's early tours, the moral panic created by the expletive-ridden interview helped spread to a wider audience the idea that "anything was possible". As discussed in chapters seven and eight, this inspired hitherto-diffuse music networks in Manchester, Liverpool, and Sheffield to quickly coalesce into distinct interconnected music worlds, combining punk's DIY ethos and subversive approach to aesthetics with each city's local styles and tastes. Out of this, the more musically heterogeneous post-punk music worlds were born.

Whilst Crossley's relational approach succeeds in explaining how networks formed on a local and national scale, the regular use of SNA maps and block models sometimes risks making punk and post-punk appear somewhat prosaic in their conception, and oddly light on creative inspiration. To account for this, he adapts Durkheim's concept of 'collective effervescence' to capture the flurries of "encouragement, stimulation and provocation" between core actors, though the concept remains arguably underused in the book overall. More attention, however, is given to debating issues of power and influence in network formations. Through a combination of documentary analysis and SNA techniques, Crossley identifies core individuals within each city network, including architects of style and publicity-making (e.g. Malcolm McLaren, Tony Wilson), musical 'taste-makers' (Nick Kent, Geoff Davies), and well-resourced 'support personnel' (Rob Gretton, Roger Eagle). Despite their seemingly-unique attributes, however, Crossley is eager to emphasise the significance of the overall *network* that brought them together, as it illustrates how individual effervescence is ultimately conditional on finding a critical mass of like-minded people with which to

compete, provoke and encourage. As this also suggests, cities provide a crucial backdrop to their formation: not only do they provide key foci (e.g. clubs, squats, rehearsal spaces), they also attract a sufficient number of well-resourced and open-minded individuals, who given the right network connections and availability, can be absorbed into these worlds.

In sum, *Networks of Sound, Style and Subversion* can be appreciated on a number of different levels: as a case study of micro-mobilisation, as a demonstration of the explanatory powers of social network analysis, and as an account of 1970s punk and post-punk that breathes new life into a well-worn subject. Criticisms are very minor: aside from a brief reference to self-styled outcasts the Stranglers, there is little exploration of peripheral actors, and why *they* didn't get drawn in more deeply into these networks. Further enquiry here may have helped crystallise some of the key characteristics that attracted certain individuals rather than others. But this takes very little away from what is a fine piece of work; a book that is driven by the author's palpable knowledge and enthusiasm for the subject, and one that should inspire readers to apply Crossley's own approach to different musical worlds. West coast psychedelia, Acid House, Riot Grrrl... many were scared, but many went anyway.

Alex Hensby is a Research Associate at the School of Social Policy, Sociology, and Social Research at the University of Kent. He received his PhD in 2014 from the University of Edinburgh, which focused on participation and non-participation in the 2010/11 UK student protests against fees and cuts. His current research examines the relationship between race, class and academic attainment in higher education. He is the co-author of *Theorizing Global Studies* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), and occasionally tweets at [@alexhensby](#). [Read more reviews by Alex.](#)

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