
Legacies of Punk Rock in Socialist Hungary

Forum: Alternative Musical Geographies: Popular Music and Space in Post-War German History

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East Punk Memories. Dir. Lucile Chaufour. Icarus Films. 51 min. Color. DVD. 2015.

With a slight shrug of the shoulders, a middle-aged, middle-class man describes his teenage years as a member of the Hungarian punk scene: ‘we were right-wing punks. Because this was full communism’. This sentiment is echoed throughout Lucile Chaufour’s documentary stroll down communist memory lane. We were angry teenagers, her interview partners tell the camera; we were unhappy, we hated communism, we hated the Soviet Union, but we loved Hungary, and anti-government sentiment in a left-wing regime turns a hard right.

It is a satisfying explanation, simple and logical amidst the frenzied Super8 movie scenes that the director shot two decades earlier of sweaty boys – they are almost always boys – screaming angst-ridden lyrics into microphones in the corners of living rooms while their friends drink beer on couches or horse around in crowded kitchens. And in the first chapter of the film, ‘Before the Fall of the Berlin Wall’, the narrative of punk music as an outlet for the pent-up frustrations of adolescents with little to do and no place to go is an easy sell. Their stories breathe life into the dull facts of life behind borders in a society of scarcity. The yawning gap between the school lessons of a socialist paradise where everyone is equal and the realities of facing juvenile detention for playing punk music or getting caught for loitering around Flórian Square or Vörösmarty Square is no less painful for the interview partners to remember now than it was while living it. Punk music offered not only a way to express anger and fear but also a way to connect with the world beyond the Iron Curtain. Bands like the Ramones and the Dead Kennedys gave voice to the fury of stifled dreams and the injustice of a world constructed by those who had power to keep those without power in their place. It was the Sex Pistols, though, who offered a kind of dark hope, anarchic prophecies of a world already drowning in greed turned

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Contemporary European History, 26, 2 (2017), pp. 413–416. © Cambridge University Press 2017
doi:[10.1017/S0960777317000030](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777317000030)

to a post-apocalyptic landscape of chaotic violence. Controversies surrounding the release of their 1977 album *Never Mind the Bullocks: Here Come the Sex Pistols* with songs like 'God Save the Queen' fueled Hungarian punks' suspicions that not even the glittering West that tantalised and teased with its claims of freedom could save them. Bands like QSS, CPG and the Kretens screamed their rage at a world set on destroying itself: 'Fight for peace! You want war? Shoot the world!' Other texts like 'Radioactive Rain' captured the existential fears of coming of age in a country ruled by nuclear-era threats of a Third World War: 'Life! Of which I have been afraid for so long'. It is hard not to smile with the former punks as they listen to soundtracks of the music they once listened to, contemplating the anarchists they once were.

This intimate depiction of one group's experiences, along with the many scenes of city streets and crowds in metros, would make the documentary an important contribution to a more nuanced picture of everyday life under communism. The real value, though, lies less in the history of punks' lives and more in the narration of their memories. Asked to reflect upon life then and now the youthful anger at the system is replaced by conscious nostalgia that is often at odds with the interview subjects' more objective tales of their pasts. Claims of, 'the streets were safe! Everyone had food on the table!' are hard to reconcile with the historical record, opening up new avenues for questions about the blinders even younger angry selves and older angry selves wear. Extensive networks of informants and a police run by a dictatorial state might have kept those citizens who had not crossed the government 'safe', but communist Hungary was hardly a safe society. Perhaps there were less obvious cases of starvation beyond the general food scarcity that affected most people in communist Eastern Europe – although that is a study waiting to be written – but the claim that everyone had enough to eat ignores questions of nutritional deficiencies, the seemingly full-time black market swaps that expanded food possibilities and long lines at the butcher's or grocer's for hours that often sent would-be customers away with empty hands. Still, the sentiment that 'things were better then' is an important one to consider both to understand ex-punks' memories of their years under communism and their perceptions of life now. But Chafour does not push her interview partners on these points, leaving the viewer to wonder how deeply-held these inconsistent beliefs are.

The documentary ends with the section 'After the fall of the Berlin Wall', addressing the dreams and dashed hopes of Hungarians in the first post-communist years. The sense of lightness and new possibilities of that period is evident in the speakers' faces: finally, the regime had fallen and democracy would be possible. Just as obvious is the disappointment that life after 1989 did not only represent a turn for the better in the everyday lives of Hungarians. 'We could already travel anyway so that didn't change', complains one former punk, ignoring the extent of travel limitations for most Hungarians under communism. Here the stories centre on the theme of cheats who manipulated the new political system to their advantage, while the rest of society flailed in the newly capitalist society. One respondent, a man in what looks like a posh apartment, insists that it is possible to live well in Hungary and find a job, perhaps in the online world if not in Hungary itself – but he is the exception in

this outlook. Any sense that Hungary might find its way in a new Europe marked by democracy has long disappeared for the rest. The nationalism and racism that came to light in the first part of the documentary rear their heads. 'Here we are, European fucking Union', opines one respondent. Another complains that everyone worries when Sinti and Roma are attacked – she uses the word 'gypsy' – but that no one cared when a gypsy attacked a (non-gypsy) teacher recently. The majority of these former punks have traded an anti-Soviet Hungarian nationalism for an anti-European one almost seamlessly; however, this time they have no lyrics to turn to that might express their pain. Current Hungarian xenophobia and nationalism seem less surprising after watching these interview excerpts, a statement on current Hungarian ideologies no less important than the documentary's statement on competing ideologies during the Cold War. The piece ends with rainy scenes of urban and rural landscapes, viewed as if from a train moving through time and space to the soundtrack of 1980s punk bands. As the credits roll, names of bands and their songs and album labels used in the documentary roll, bringing to mind the question of how some punk bands must have received permission to record their music, or else recorded it illegally. The documentary remains silent on this issue, pointing to new avenues of music history to be explored.

East Punk Memories, as fascinating as it is, suffers from the tendency of some documentary filmmakers to let sources speak for themselves. They cannot all, at least not here, leaving too many obvious questions unanswered that surely could have been asked and answered. One is the nature of the documentary itself. Nowhere is it obvious that the historical footage was shot by the director herself for a piece twenty years ago about punks in Hungary; only a visit to the distribution company's website shares this fact. Given the director's intimate knowledge of the group other unasked questions are also confusing. Why are there almost no women in the home movies of 1980s punk parties? There are two female interview partners, but it is not clear what their roles were as former punks. Looking at a photograph of one of them, a male ex-punk wonders if she had been someone's girlfriend, perhaps even his briefly. One of the interview partners says that he has been jailed many times before, with good reason, and that he probably will be again. This clip seems too important to have left in without learning what his supposed crimes had been – political? Petty theft? Major criminal acts? And what of the music itself that we hear primarily as a soundtrack to the film? Who wrote the lyrics? What about underground bands – did they leave an historical trace? The seemingly well-to-do former punk barely appears on-screen, but the tattooed, beer-drinking friends coded as working class are regular features. Ultimately, this is a documentary whose primary value lies in its dialogue with other sources, primary and secondary. There is not enough material to categorise it as a history of punk in Hungary, although it is a strong contribution to this area of research. As an example of the constructed nature of memory, it provides an invaluable resource to how we approach the decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall in Eastern Europe. As a history of music and society, it reminds us of the important role that sub-cultures, especially youth sub-cultures, played in communist Hungary, including how they were situated in a larger, global context. Undergraduates in

courses on Eastern Europe or history of music will delight in this glimpse of the Iron Curtain punk scene; senior scholars will find much here to begin new research. Still, there is no happy ending here; although the anger and frustration are no longer shouted into microphones, they remain a constant in these former punks' lives. The screaming rage of their youth has been muted somewhat, but their group's sense of injustice continues, their earlier songs of fear and repression no less relevant today than when they were first sung.