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Zagrożenia jednostki  
we współczesnym społeczeństwie  
Ohrožení jedince v současné společnosti  
Threat to the individual  
in the contemporary society

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Redakcja naukowa:  
Marek Walancik  
Stanislava Hoferková

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# Punk subculture in Poland – from rebellion to stylization

Mikołaj Brenk

**Abstract:** Contemporary punk in Poland can be characterized as a heterogenous phenomenon, undergoing changes, which occur on several levels. This text has briefly characterized the five levels on which the possible activity of people who understand and identify with the punk subculture in a different way can be considered. First of all: contemporary Polish punk takes part in concerts, often organized in the form of large music events, where through the outfit he expresses his passion for the subculture. The second possibility is to refer to the splendour of the Polish punk through sentimental journeys in time in the form of events, books, films, interviews with musicians playing on the punk stages in the 80s or the participants of these events. The third option is the social activity, undertaken in the spirit of anarchism and freedom, opposition to capitalist rules, where the outfit and the punk-styled external look sometimes move to the background. The fourth option of activity of contemporary punks are informal groups, which spend their free time through their nihilist and anarchist lifestyle and the use of stimulants. Finally, the fifth element of expressing the punk subculture is pulling it into the fashion trends in chain stores with clothing, thanks to which it becomes one of the products to choose from and at the same time is devoid of an ideological layer.

**Key words:** punk, subculture, post-subculture, punk rock music, rock festival, anarchism

# Introduction

Punk has undoubtedly been one of the most intense cultural phenomena of the 1980s and early 1990s. Therefore, contemporary contexts of the presence of punk in the social reality still arouse interest of the media, researchers or youth seeking their own style. In this article I would like to point out the selected features of the Polish punk from the times of its magnificence, find social phenomena that in subsequent years cultivated the memory of this subculture, as well as mark its relations with contemporary social movements. It is not my goal to show the detailed characteristics of this subculture, or to point to the next changes on the music scene of this genre – these phenomena are undoubtedly interesting, but have already been examined and described at various angles.

## Subculture of rebellion

For the youth of the first half of the 80s, the subcultural affiliation was very popular. It could be expressed through a conscious and full selection of the subculture, or the spontaneous joining a subculture in search of a peer group. Another possibility was only a short-term submission to fashion of belonging to a subculture without getting to know its ideological elements. Idzikowska-Czubaj indicates that at the time the punk subculture has the strongest effect on young generations, particularly related to the punk rock music. Punk won the hearts of numerous members in both large and smaller urban centres (2006, p. 275-276). The status of the capital of punk rock was awarded to the festival in Jarocin (a provincial town of Greater Poland). Despite the present of representatives of many subcultures, such as skinheads and heavy metals<sup>1</sup>, punks were the symbol of the event for several years with their characteristic appearance and way of being. At that time, Jarocin was considered a space for peaceful presentation of music. It was attributed the role of a meeting where youth manifested their rebellion and dissatisfaction with the political reality of the PRL without any restrictions<sup>2</sup>.

The punk movement demonstrated its rebellion against the existing reality on several levels: starting from the names of bands playing punk rock, sophisticated song lyrics flowing from the stage, also through the appearance, up to the world view. Due to the extensiveness of the issue, let us use examples. Among the names of music bands, we find those whose names illustrate

<sup>1</sup> There were fewer members of such subcultures as: Satanists, hippies, Rastafarians, Oasis – i.e. the church youth movement, and Hare Krishnas. See: Lesiakowski, Perzyna, Toborek 2004, p. 144, 153, 174.

<sup>2</sup> Paradoxically, the festival was co-organized by the local authorities of the communist party that ruled Poland, but despite this, the ubiquitous censorship at that time was applied to a small extent. The consent to the existence of the festival in such a form can be explained by the intentional passivity of the authorities, which through the form of rebellion and expression wanted to distract the youth from political involvement in the then emerging political opposition. See: Wrzesień 2013, p. 302-302.

the political situation of Poland in the 1980s, e.g. Crisis, SS-20<sup>3</sup>, Opposition, Moscow. In turn, the names of other bands escaped from the generally accepted aesthetic sensitivity – here we can list names, such as: Corpses, Brain Defect, Night Rats, WC, Toilet, Axe, Clinical Death. In turn, the punk look in Poland referred to the model from the countries of Western Europe, where this movement was born. Its characteristics was clearly described by Ryszard Ciarka: "Punk his hard. Aggressive behaviour bordering on brutality. Faces with safety pins fastened to the cheeks and ears. Leather jackets with a painted emblem of a favourite band or with an appropriate slogan to reflect the attitude of its owner to life and the whole environment (...). The heads were cut into strange forms, coloured hair, hairdos reminiscent of recruits or ghostly characters from horror movies of the 1940s. All this was supposed to fill with fear and that's how it was read. A new creation, a shocking style of being, dynamic music performed in the rock convention (...)" (1988, p. 17). The elements of the outfit of the punks included, among others: a leather jacket, heavy boots (e.g. boots or military footwear), studs on clothing, a band with studs on the arm, a safety pin, a razor, chains, high dyed hair. Thanks to a clear pattern, it was relatively easy to be a member of this subculture, having at least a few punk elements in one's outfit, because due to the shortage of goods in the PRL period, purchasing a "complete" outfit was an extremely difficult task.

It should be noted here that punk, like other subcultures, gathered very heterogenous members in terms of involvement, i.e. young people could show a different degree of involvement in the subculture. For example, it could have been the main dimension of their lives, becoming a new identity. It could also be only a form of entertainment on the occasion of a concert or other event – it was a form of escape from the monotonous, though dominant, realities of the school, family or professional life (Muggleton 2004, p. 106-107). In turn, seasonal affiliation could, e.g., consist in going to a festival in Jarocin once in a punk outfit and with a mohawk on your head. Every day, some of the youth who used to be punks in Jarocin were ordinary students who did not contest the reality. Another common feature for the subcultures of the 80s was the low doctrinal awareness of their members. Most often, it was limited to the knowledge of popular slogans "we fight for peace", "we want to stand out", "we do what we want" (Wójcik 1992, p. 82).

The weakening of punk subculture influences took place at the end of the 1980s. At that time, a large part of youth identifying themselves with the punks began to listen to metal, more and more popular, which also had a rich setting in terms of outfits for the fans of this music and the course of concerts. In turn, people who wanted to express their rebellion or aggression more radically began to identify themselves with groups of skins and hooligans, recording an increase in the number of members at that time. In addition to the interpenetration of styles of clothing, or preferred music, these subcultures began to fight each other, there were frequent fights (Lisowski, Piotrowicz 2017, p. 39).

<sup>3</sup> SS-20 is a Soviet ballistic missile manufactured during the Cold War.

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## Punk in controlled conditions

At the beginning of the 1990s, punk in the make of the communist regime has died. Even the festival in Jarocin lost its charisma, there was no idea for its functioning in the new political conditions. It has lost its original form of review of young rock bands who annually introduced “freshness” and timeliness in their message. Instead, the organizers focused on inviting professional bands, of which heavy metal bands were the most popular, offering the pyrotechnic effects to the audience along with strong music (Jankowski 1994, p. 5). As a result of the demolition of the city centre by a group of participants of the festival in 1994, as well as organizational and financial difficulties and the opposition of residents, the organization of the event was discontinued (Piotrowicz 1995, p. 5).

The rebirth of the tradition of a large rock festival, which could have been a meeting place for some parts of the then punk environment, took place in 1995. At that time, Jerzy Owskiak, previously a member of the Jarocin festival management, initiated the creation of the Polish event – the Woodstock. The annual summer event was created on organizational principles drawn from the professional events in the United States, which was to ensure the elimination of adverse behaviours (e.g. brawls of the members of subcultures known, among others, from Jarocin, devastation of the environment, abuse). An effort was made to eliminate drugs, and the order forces threw aggressive hooligans (including punks) out who tried to cause riots. The annual event promoted the positive image of the festival, and thus the emerging subcultures (although much less than in Jarocin). The festival had financial stability (unlike the one in Jarocin), thanks to which it was possible to take care of the professional organization. The event was not ticketed, which was another factor encouraging young people to participate. An additional element of a positive image of was the organizer, that is one of the biggest Polish charities – the Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity (Owskiak, Skaradziński 2010, p. 27). These incentives caused that the rock festival became a mass event, attracting hundreds of thousands of listeners, and listening to music once reserved for a relatively narrow audience (I am thinking about punk and heavy metal of the 1980s) started being a part of mass culture.

Another festival reminiscent of the splendour of the punk subculture takes place in Jarocin. Due to the bad fame of recent editions, the restoration of this event after a few years’ break was a difficult task and it was not possible until 2000 (once). However, it turned out that the festival has little to do with the atmosphere of an event from a dozen or so years ago. What is interesting, there were practically no punks among the small audience at that time, and there were no members of other subcultures. A very calm, or even monotonous atmosphere resembled a picnic, and the police prepared for the riots were left with no work to do (Gogolkiewicz, Kaźmierczak 2000, p. 14-15). Further attempts to resurrect the festival were initiated by the “Jarocin PRL Festival”

in 2005, held later in the year, whose organizers reconstructed the old look of the city and the form of the festival from the 80s in detail thereby attracting a large audience. Punk and other subcultures of the PRL in this form have become the object of “living history”. It turned out that the specificity of this subculture results in the need to recall slogans, atmosphere and outfits from twenty years ago.

The above festivals are only examples of many music events held in Poland, where one can meet punk fans. All these events are characterized by setting clear boundaries for members of subcultures. These boundaries are within the current law, but go beyond the convention of everyday life – hence there is no consent for violence or drug trafficking, but the volunteers can use mud baths, parading in an intriguing outfit, sexual promiscuity and drinking a lot of alcohol. The boundaries referred to, in assumption were not to exist for punks – people manifesting being out of the bounds, thrown out at their own request from society, moreover – making this being out of the society one of the pillars of the subculture, its identification feature. What is more – it is worth emphasizing one more time – that the punk image created in this festival context is most often clearly positive. Punk is no longer associated with someone neglected, with a person from the margin, and more with someone wearing colourful clothing, taking part in a subtle game.

## Punks Not Dead. Towards post-subculture

Announcing the death of punk would be premature. What’s more – it should be written that the rebellion in the spirit of this subculture lives and is doing well, it just needs to be found in the mass of the contemporary culture<sup>4</sup>. The phenomenon of apparent death of punk is noticeable in Poland and is part of trends visible in the West. Clark Dylan indicates that „perhaps that is one of the great secrets of subcultural history: punk faked its own death. Gone was the hair, gone was the boutique clothing, gone was negative rebellion (whatever they do, we’ll do the opposite). Gone was the name. Maybe it had to die, so as to collect its own life insurance. When punk was pronounced dead it bequeathed to its successors – to itself – a new subcultural discourse. The do-it-yourself culture had spawned independent record labels, speciality record stores, and music venues: in these places culture could be produced with less capitalism, more autonomy, and more anonymity. Punk faked its own death so well that everyone believed it.” (2003, p. 231).

<sup>4</sup> A similar differentiation within the punk subculture is pointed to by researchers from other countries. See: Lojdová 2011 p. 167-167.

Who is a modern punk then?. The stereotypical appearance of a punk with a characteristic coloured mohawk on the head has expired<sup>5</sup>, in addition, even the identification of oneself with a punk stopped being significant. Among the features of today's punks, researchers are looking for a particular world view, expressed in the context of political declarations, especially regarding social issues (Clark 2003, p. 231-232). People who consider themselves as modern punks place their system of values and the ideas around a set of concepts such as: anti-consumerism, ecology, human rights, animal rights, vegetarianism, empathy, equality, respect for otherness, tolerance, anti-fascism, freedom of choice, justice. In turn, initiatives that are co-created by punks are social actions created around the values mentioned above. Among them, we can find actions and social phenomena known from large urban centres: Food not bomb, squatting, Critical Mass, Free Shop, Antifa. Moreover, clusters of people with such views conduct publishing activities (creation of zines), organize concerts of band playing so-called independent music, organize lectures and speeches, actions and protests in a more or less conventional form (Bergier 2011, p. 71-72). In other words – part of contemporary punks co-creates an independent culture with people with the so-called freedom worldview or uses contemporary cultural phenomena to create their own enclaves – for example, some squats are clearly related to punk music (Donaghey 2017, p. 5-6), which is known for the close relations of both subcultures in the West Europe. Some researchers refer to the above-described re-evaluated phenomenon in the punk subculture, consisting in the departure from the nihilist slogans of destruction in favour of the desire to change the world, as post-punk (Jędrzejewski 2013, p. 311).

In addition to socially engaged punks, there are still groups of young people who shift the weight of their activity on regular meetings in small groups in the form reminiscent of behaviours from the 1980s. An example of such an attitude are the studies by Sosnowski and Tankielun, which describe a group of several punks professing anarchism, understood as complete independence and lack of hierarchy – both social and group. They usually come from dysfunctional families, they are considered to be dangerous by their surroundings. Everyday meetings in one's own group consist in the fact that they spend time together in a fun way, during which they take intoxicants: alcohol, plants and mushrooms with a psychoactive effect, synthetic drugs, glue and others (2012, p. 207-211). The desire to stay in the adapted attitude thus fits in with one of the traditional punk slogans: *no future*. In turn, Lutostański describes a group of punks whose members engage in the development of their subculture by supporting the local music scene (going to concerts, buying records), writing "punks not death" on the walls, making T-shirts, sticking stickers with a logotype of their group, playing in a punk band (2011, p. 169).

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<sup>5</sup> Aleksandra Litorowicz draws attention to the uniformity of the style of old subcultures: "elements of modern subculture members' attire were codes, which on the one hand cemented group identity, and on the other hand distinguished a given subculture from others and the dominant society (2012, p. 138).

The affiliation to a subculture that activates itself in the above-described way usually requires such a reconstruction of its own identity that it meets the rigorous requirements of the group that creates it – both in terms of the value system and everyday lifestyle. As Melosik points out, “nowadays, the belonging of an individual to such a subculture group is an even greater burden than before. This is particularly noticeable in the context of gaining the possibility of social success. A person who consistently identifies with resistance or rebellion oriented group, or a group creating an alternative world is de facto excluded from the mainstream of culture and career (which, of course, may suit him/her). It is true that contemporary society seems to tolerate almost any otherness, but it is by no means an “empathic tolerance”, but a “cold” one. A person who enters the role of a “misfit” is not automatically rejected or relegated from society. The marginalization of this person takes place through silent mechanisms of ignorance” (2016, p. 74).

One more aspect of the contemporary functioning of punk is the possibility of stylization, i.e. wearing an outfit that is clearly associated with this subculture. Needless to say, this is only about the fashion-related accent, without identifying with other elements of this subculture. At this point, it is worth mentioning the note by Fatyga that pop culture makes facilities out of the youth culture, the reservoir contents and forms, and a huge market (2005, p. 269-270). A superficial analysis of the market offer of large chain stores with clothing shows a regular range of products related to punk. Sometimes entire collections are created in reference to this subculture – for example, the Zara collection from November 2016<sup>6</sup>. The outfits offered by this manufacturer are kept in the black convention, the proposed shoes are heavy and high, the ornaments contain a large number of metal elements.

The stylization fashion described above is part of one of the comments written by Wrzesień in the context of the functioning of post-subcultures: “these are *media products* – are portrayed in the media and thanks to them they gain next supporters (...). The media, providing knowledge about post-subcultures, mainly form their image, and it “attracts” potential supporters, who themselves choose their post-subcultural styles. Therefore, post-subculture (...) is a commodity sold in a subcultural supermarket. If I like it, I want it and I buy it. (...) In fact, in this approach, (post)subcultures *only* become fashion and are exhibiting the external attributes of the preferred style of expression much more than the behavioural patterns implemented in the everyday lifestyles. The members of post-subcultures do not show any ideological interests, they do not form any oppositions (...), what is more, they do not see clear inter-cultural boundaries – the lines of divisions disappear, and the post-modern subcultural identity is fluid and various (Wrzesień 2012, p. 70-71).

<sup>6</sup> Pretty in punk, New TRF editorial, London, November 2016. <http://www.zara.com/us/en/editorials/pretty-in-punk-%7C-trf-c883105.html>

## Summary

Contemporary punk in Poland can be characterized as a heterogenous phenomenon, undergoing changes, which occur on several levels. This text has briefly characterized the five levels on which the possible activity of people who understand and identify with the punk subculture in a different way can be considered. First of all: contemporary Polish punk takes part in concerts, often organized in the form of large music events, where through the outfit he expresses his passion for the subculture. The second possibility is to refer to the splendour of the Polish punk through sentimental journeys in time in the form of events, books, films, interviews with musicians playing on the punk stages in the 80s or the participants of these events. The third option is the social activity, undertaken in the spirit of anarchism and freedom, opposition to capitalist rules, where the outfit and the punk-styled external look sometimes move to the background. The fourth option of activity of contemporary punks are informal groups, which spend their free time through their nihilist and anarchist lifestyle and the use of stimulants. Finally, the fifth element of expressing the punk subculture is pulling it into the fashion trends in chain stores with clothing, thanks to which it becomes one of the products to choose from and at the same time is devoid of an ideological layer. In the end it should be added that the models described above are variable, diverse and only seemingly try to organize the phenomenon, which by definition escapes the attempts of its organization – just as the “no rules” slogan related to this subculture.

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