Colin Coulter (ed.), *Working for the Clampdown: The Clash, the Dawn of Neoliberalism and the Political Promise of Punk*

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The Clash officially split up 35 years ago. Nevertheless, there is still intense interest in a band which continues to divide opinion. The latest addition to the academic work about the Clash may prove to be equally divisive. Colin Coulter’s invitation to (re)examine the political impact and the contemporary relevance of the band by rejecting the sanitised, dehistoricised vision of it proposed by the culture industry is to be welcomed. As is the aim to present a “rigorous but accessible account of one of the most influential and controversial bands ever to have graced a stage” (p. 4) and a “critical engagement with the cultural politics of the band” (p. 4). Yet Coulter admits that the contributions are “more often celebratory” (p. 5) since many authors of chapters are also fans whose life trajectories have been influenced, in one way or another, by their encounter with the Clash and their music. To those whose lives have not been similarly transformed, the almost unrelenting admiration expressed in the book and the autobiographical details about the authors’ relationship with the band may be a little grating or may even put some off reading it to the end. Nevertheless, this would be unfortunate as the chapters provide new approaches to old debates and occasionally break new ground.
The book is partly the result of the conference entitled “A Riot of Our Own. A symposium on the Clash”, which was held in Belfast in June 2014. The location of the event had a dual significance. Firstly, in October 1977 the cancellation of a gig by the Clash led to protests by disappointed fans that have gone down in the band’s mythology as the “Belfast riot”. Secondly, during their stay, the members of the band were photographed against the backdrop of a conflict-ridden, militarised city. These photographs, which were published in the British music press, strengthened the macho, rebel image of the Clash, leading them to be accused of exploiting the situation in Belfast. These events are mentioned in the introduction (and one of the photographs adorns the front cover) but, somewhat surprisingly, they disappear from the rest of the book.

In his introduction, Coulter presents some of the contradictions which have been traditionally noted about the band: opposition to corporate capital / signing for CBS and working for the capitalist music industry (hence the title of the book), hostility to war / wearing military clothing, support for female artists / cultivation of a macho image, telling the truth / revising accounts of the life of the band and its members, and generosity to fans / less humane attitude to their entourage and to each other. He gives a brief biography of the band for nonspecialists, situating their appearance and evolution in the context of the crisis of social democracy in the UK and the rise of neoliberalism. He observes that the Clash were not in the forefront of opposition to Margaret Thatcher because of the progressive broadening of their horizons and growing interest in other countries.

The first part of the book is composed of three chapters about “The Clash, the politics of pop and the neoliberal conjuncture”. Jason Toynbee revisits his youthful appreciation of the band as encapsulating the spirit of rebellion and his later rejection of this view. Adopting a Marxist approach based on a loose relationship between base and superstructure, he sees The Clash as cultural workers with a certain degree of autonomy in their particular industry. However, the commercial logic of rock, symbolised by CBS’s desire for The Clash to break the American market, aggravated the tensions inherent to the band’s position, as did the changing political and economic climate which made the cultural expression of anticapitalist opinions more problematic. He concludes that the band had an authentic commitment to politics and to oppressed groups and that their career showed the possibilities for, and limits to, cultural activism.

Caroline Coon is the only nonacademic in the collection. As a former manager of the Clash, she gives an inside perspective, which allows her to debunk some of the myths about the band and punk in general. She specifically argues in favour of going beyond punk’s discourse of antiartistry and antielitism, which she believes to have been accepted uncritically by left-wing academics. Based on her own first-hand experience, she states that the first wave of British punk bands were “as musically accomplished and ambitious as it is possible for teenagers to be” (p. 34) and that The Clash spent long hours rehearsing. She suggests that many of the band’s critics had unrealistic expectations of the four young men and that their increasingly macho and militaristic appearance was a response to accusations of betrayal of punk ideology. Despite this image, many women who went on to form bands had personal and professional connections to The Clash, who were also brave enough to take on a female manager.
She also questions the common vision of 1976 as “Year Zero” as punk tapped into countercultural networks which had appeared in the 1960s.

Colin Coulter notes that, although The Clash’s work is widely thought to be passionate and politically optimistic, it also purveys a sense of fatalism and despondency. This can be explained by events in the life of Joe Strummer, who wrote most of the band’s lyrics, as well as by the domestic and global context of the late 1970s and early 1980s. Coulter uses the concept of left melancholia, pioneered by Walter Benjamin and further developed by Jodi Dean, to reinterpret the song “Straight to Hell”. The use of left melancholia permits Coulter to see revolutionary potential in a song which, at first sight, would appear to merely express resignation. Seen from this perspective, M.I.A.’s use of the song over 20 years later in her “Paper Planes” unleashes its radical potential.

The second part of the book deals with The Clash and the cultural politics of punk. It begins with a chapter by Ruth Adams about “England past and England future in 1970s punk”, in which she attempts to determine to what extent the cosmopolitan approach to music of The Clash was progressive and forward-looking. In order to do so, she compares the band with the Sex Pistols, who, in her opinion, can be seen as unconventional examples of a tradition of English working-class culture. By recasting reggae in their own idiom, the Clash were able to go beyond the limitations of punk as a subculture. They thus broke down barriers and opened up avenues for the future of multicultural music in the UK such as Two Tone.

Kieran Cashell concentrates on the significance of the year 1977 in order to retrieve “the messianic promise of punk” (p. 120). According to Cashell, contemporary mediation of punk depoliticises it and renders it innocuous. However, he goes back to The Clash’s eponymous first album, in which the themes of confrontation and conflict were omnipresent, to state that it was “radically discontinuous with the history of recorded music preceding it” (p. 121), transgressing every established convention of popular music (and making it of significantly greater interest than their later work including London Calling). Once again using Benjamin, he suggests that, although punk only left a trace in history, it was a sign of future revolutionary potential.

Pete Dale examines the politics of novelty. Closely analysing the music of The Clash, he establishes that it is quite conservative and unoriginal, with the exception of “What’s My Name”. The latter was heavily influenced by guitarist Keith Levene, who later joined PiL. Contrasting the adventurous Levene with the more populist Mick Jones, Dale looks at the relationship between aesthetics and politics in music. Advocating the “disambiguation of aesthetic judgement from political action” (p. 141), he notes all the same that more people were inspired to become interested in politics and take part in political action by The Clash than by PiL.

The final chapter of the second part is Martin James’ “‘The beautiful people are ugly too’: The Clash as my ‘true fiction’”. James returns to perceptions of the authenticity of The Clash and, observing that experiences of fans are frequently excluded from accounts of the band’s history, studies the authenticity of the voices of fans. Mentioning his own experience as a teenager of following The Clash on tour, he notes that he was attracted by the macho image of the band and wanted to be part of their gang. However, he admits that he did not want to share this experience with other fans. He thus draws attention to the significance of the individual in subcultures, an aspect which is often overlooked in favour of collective identities and experiences.
The final part is made up of four chapters about The Clash and the world. Although it is arguably the weakest part of the book, the chapters all contain some interesting observations and comments. In “Up and down the Westway’ or ‘live by the river’? Britishness, Englishness, London and The Clash”, Conrad Brunström suggests that a particular sense of being Londoners contributed to the eclectic global engagements of the band and that a sensitivity to place facilitated an interest in and understanding of the world at large. Harry Browne broaches the myths and realities of the Clash’s relationship with New York. Using recollections of his own experiences as a Clash fan, he observes that in 1980/1981 American fans were less concerned with punk purity than their British counterparts and welcomed the band uncritically. Although The Clash’s openness to reggae and solidarity with the West Indian community were seen as examples of their exotic Englishness, the rap artists who opened for them in New York were given a hostile reception by predominantly white audiences. Alessandro Moliterno looks at the band’s relationship with the struggle for Indigenous Australian rights. During the Clash’s 1982 tour of Australia, they allowed the activist Gary Foley to speak from the stage while they performed the song “Armagideon Time”. Interestingly, the band did not speak for Indigenous Australian people but allowed him to speak for himself. Moliterno argues that, although the Australian media hardly covered Foley’s speeches, they represent an important episode in the history music and politics and “an intelligent and, arguably, powerful example of solidarity” (p. 205). The final chapter by Giacomo Bottà and Ferruccio Quercetti deals with a concert given by the band in Bologna in 1980. It was sponsored by the Communist-led local council, which hoped to recreate links with young people. Despite the concert attracting considerable attention, younger punks and disillusioned leftists were in fact more favourable to the politics of Crass and used the opportunity to distribute a flyer accusing the Clash of being outdated and being manipulated by local politicians.

In spite of the eclectic nature and wide range of the contributions, there are some surprising, and perhaps unfortunate omissions. One such instance concerns the British miners’ strike of 1984/1985. The strike is rightly referred to as a turning point in the struggle against Margaret Thatcher’s neoliberal policies (p. 46), but the Clash’s support for the miners is not mentioned. In fact, they headlined two benefit gigs for striking miners at the Brixton Academy in December 1984 (the gigs were named “Scargill’s Christmas Party” after the leader of the miners’ trade union). This omission, which is common to the vast majority of accounts of the band’s history, can perhaps be explained by the fact that the gigs took place during the post-Mick Jones incarnation of the band and that the strike ultimately failed to prevent the decimation of the coal industry and to halt the forward march of Thatcherism. It does not therefore fit in with heroic narratives of the band’s career and commitments. However, it qualifies the idea that they were absent from the struggle against the Conservatives and suggests that there is still scope for more work on the Clash and neoliberalism.
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