

# KEEP IT SIM- PLE MAKE IT FAST!

AN APPROACH  
TO UNDERGROUND  
MUSIC SCENES (VOL. 4)  
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***Keep it Simple, Make it Fast!***

An approach to underground music scenes (vol. 4)

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## 9.2 Punk, gender and politics in Croatia

**Vanja Dergić<sup>221</sup>**

**A b s t r a c t**

This paper will introduce key findings of the ethnographic case study 'Anti-fascist punk activism' conducted as part of the MYPLACE project. Through 21 in-depth interviews, the most common topics that arose were related to gender issues and perceptions of politics. One of the main findings is related to the specific perception of gender roles among members of the punk scene. Except for the activist scene, in which women are still heavily involved, the ratio of men to women is uneven in other areas. This raises the question of the similarity between the perception of gender roles in the punk scene and that among the general and more mainstream culture. This issue can also be discussed in relation to the fragmentation of the punk scene. Most of the respondents expressed critical views towards contemporary politics and the wish to subvert the dominant discourse; however, when discussing specific undertakings to change this discourse, a certain gap is apparent between specific principles and practices.

**Keywords:** *Politics, anti-fascism, gender, apolitical.*



## 1. Introduction

World War II is a topic that still divides people in Croatia, either through their opinions on politics or indirectly through the experiences of their families. On the one hand, World War II is associated with communist crimes and the discovery of mass graves, and with fascist crimes, racial laws, and concentration camps on the other. Because Croatia has experienced both fascist and socialist regimes within a relatively short period of time, young people today have an indirect relationship with these times through their grandparents and their experiences. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Croatia underwent many political changes accompanied by violent conflicts<sup>222</sup>. After the collapse of Yugoslavia, the early 1990s were marked by the Croatian War of Independence, which resulted in direct population losses and material damage (Živić and Pokos, 2004). This war impacted political discourse and social life enormously, as did the Croatian transition process, which unfolded simultaneously (Rogić, 2000, 2009). The following years brought the re-traditionalisation of society (Županov, 1995) and the strengthening of the role and influence of the Catholic Church, along with right-wing political ideas. Nevertheless, the democratization of political system brought the development of civil society and the establishment of non-governmental human rights organizations. One of the most famous anti-nationalist and anti-war initiatives of the time was the Croatia Anti-War Campaign (Antiratna Kampanja Hrvatske, AWC). This initiative made alternative political participation possible during a time in which nationalist discourse prevailed (Janković and Mokrović, 2011). In the second half of the 1990s, the punk scene was one of the crucial 'places' that brought together actors and activists engaged in anti-war and anti-nationalist movements and initiatives. It can thus be said that this was the political environment in which the punk scene evolved in those years, laying the foundation for the further political engagement of members of the punk scene.

### 1.1. Theoretical framework

Research findings on the political participation of youth in Croatia in recent years has shown disinterest in politics, mistrust in politicians, and a lack of understanding and knowledge of political processes, all of which leads to the non-participation of youth in formal politics (Franc *et al.*, 2013; Ilišin *et al.*, 2013). Because of recent trends regarding youth and their political activities, the current research attempts to compare these research findings with the perception of political engagement among youth active in the punk scene. Just as McKay (1996) discusses punk as an example of political activity among youth, punk is often understood as being closer to the left-wing in the context of formal political discourse (Hebdige, 1980; Perasović, 2001). Some other authors see this connection to anti-racist and left-wing politics as over-rated in the context of punk subculture (Pilkington, 2014; Gololobov, Pilkington & Steinholt, 2014). Although research of the punk scene in Croatia has identified strong political attitudes, at least in one part of the scene (Perasović, 2013), post-subcultural theory considers identity, style, musical preferences, and other characteristics fluid, hedonistically-motivated behaviour, resulting in a lack of political involvement (Krnić and Perasović, 2013). This post-subcultural point of view is apparent in research on the Russian punk scene and its political indifference by Gololobov, Pilkington & Steinholt (2014) and Pilkington (2014); however, this does not hold for the punk scene in Croatia. This is

<sup>222</sup> As Živić and Pokos (2004) have shown, only in the last decade of 20th century total demographic losses in Croatia were 450.276 inhabitants, from which around 93% were migration population losses.

particularly applicable to the punk scene in Pula,<sup>223</sup> which displays a “left-wing, pronouncedly anti-nationalist and anti-fascist orientation, with fierce critics of local government and the entire political scene” (Perasović, 2013, p. 497). Generally, the punk subculture is marked by explicit attitudes towards politics, as well as fragmentation grounded in political attitudes and perceptions of political behaviour (Perasović, 2013; Dergić, 2014).

Gender relations in the punk scene coincide with the paradox discussed by Leblanc (2006) in the context of punk subculture; regardless of the extent to which this subculture provides space and opportunities to oppose different forms of limitations, this same subculture places limitations on women that are identical to the mainstream. In other words, “punk failed to significantly disrupt gender regimes” (Pilkington, 2014, p. 29). Often seen as “invisible” in subcultural theory and subcultures, McRobbie and Gerber (1976) discuss young women and how their roles reflect the general norms and positions they hold in broader society. They also describe female invisibility in youth subcultures as a “self-fulfilling prophecy” and as a double bind for young women in a working-class parental value system. Leblanc (2006) believes that young women participating in the punk scene are viewed as constructing different “strategies of resistance”, just as some authors (Križanić, 2013) draw an interesting connection between gender roles in subcultures and examples of Japanese female subculture as a resistance to tradition and patriarchy. Križanić (2013) analyses how traditional roles for young males in Japan are constructed to be more focused on their education and working ethics in order to prepare them for the role of providers and breadwinners for their future families. This is the why, unlike young women, they do not have time between childhood and adulthood to express individuality and creativity, which are perceived as “non-masculine” and “weak”. Through this example, Križanić (2013) shows how young women in Japan are at the forefront of youth subcultures. Unlike the punk subculture, which perpetuates established gender norms, Krnić and Perasović (2013) mention rave subculture as another example of a subculture that redefines gender relations and eliminates traditional gender roles.

## 1.2. The Croatian punk scene

After the collapse of Yugoslavia and at the beginning of the war in Croatia, some individuals who had been active in the *Svarun*<sup>224</sup> initiative in the 1980s became involved in the *Croatia Anti-War Campaign* (Antiratna Kampanja Hrvatske). This group actively advocated conscientious objection and civil service in the army, organising workshops, peace-building projects, and issuing the fanzine *ARKzine*, among other activities. During a time of prevalent nationalist discourse, an anti-war and anti-nationalist initiative such as AWC politically mobilised youth by providing them with alternative ways to participate in the political events of the time (Janković and Mokrović, 2011; Komnenović, 2014). Since the majority of actors in AWC and the anti-war scene were also active in subcultural groups, the punk scene in Croatia itself evolved to link music with anti-war and anti-nationalist politics (Perasović, 2001; 2013). This connection between civil society and subcultural groups created an environment for the opening of autonomous cultural spaces that fulfilled the need for political activity that diverged from mainstream politics and existing political options. One of these groups was the autonomous cultural centre *Attack!*, founded in 1997 in Zagreb; it was conceived as a platform that would bring together politically engaged groups involved

**223** Pula is highlighted because of its long-standing active punk scene, involving the Monte Paradiso hardcore punk festival, which has been held yearly since 1990. An Antifa festival is also held every year, where participants have the opportunity to discuss various topics related to contemporary anti-fascism and historical heritage, as well as to participate in workshops, movie projections, and punk concerts.

**224** Svarun was a working group for ecological, feminist, peace, and spiritual initiatives founded in Zagreb in 1986. One of the first campaigns this group organised was against nuclear power plants (Perasović, 2001; Dergić, 2011).

in feminist, anti-war, anarchist, human rights, and LGBT initiatives (Cvek et al. 2014; Janković and Mokrović, 2011). Because of the political and social context, the 1990s punk scene in Croatia accepted the 'Crass paradigm' (McKay, 1996); members of the scene were involved in peace, ecological, and feminist activists and movements. At the time, political opinions were expressed in many different forms – fanzines, alternative theatre, and music festivals, to name a few (Janković and Mokrović, 2011; Cvek et al., 2014; Perasović, 2001). In addition to *Attack!* - autonomous cultural centre in Zagreb, the Monteparadiso crew<sup>225</sup>, based in the former Karlo Rojc Barracks in Pula, formed a crucial binding factor for the punk scene in the 1990s.

Discussing punk and new wave in the 1980s (especially in the late 1980s during the beginnings of Yugoslavia's collapse) Perasović (2001:233) emphasises that it began to appear as 'a heretofore unknown form of political engagement, one that openly criticised the system and discussed concrete, everyday problems'.

## 2. Methodology

This paper is based on an ethnographic case study entitled "Anti-fascist punk activism" undertaken as a part of the MYPLACE<sup>226</sup> project. The main goal of the project was to research how the social participation of youth is formed by the shadows (past, present and future) of totalitarian systems and populism in Europe. This study was conducted through participative observation following the writing of a research diary, semi-structured interviews, and observation and analysis of social networks (for example Facebook sites of bands, festivals, and individuals) and local punk internet forums. Fieldwork took place from January 2012 until February 2014, resulting in 46 field diary entries, while interviews were conducted from October 2013 until February 2014. Twenty-one in-depth interviews were held with members of a local anti-fascist organisation, members of a non-profit collective that organises punk concerts, and members of local punk bands (29 hours of recorded conversation in total, of which the duration of interviews ranges from 52 to 154 minutes).

In addition to topics such as personal relations, perceptions of the punk and anti-fascist scene in general, and opinions on the punk scene, politics and violence, another important and frequently-mentioned topic was that of gender issues. The overall gender distribution is quite balanced among the respondents – out of a total of 21 respondents, 11 were female, nine were male, and one was transgender. Even though the gender distribution among the respondents was quite balanced, it was noted during fieldwork that there are usually twice as many men than women at concerts or festivals. Gender issues appeared to be an important topic for 17 of our respondents, who discussed their opinions and perceptions of gender issues.

All interviews were coded using NVivo 9.2, in which the Level 1 node was entitled "Gender issues", with eight Level 2 nodes,<sup>227</sup> 17 sources, and 431 references. There were three Level 1 nodes entitled "Engagement, apoliticism and anti-politicism", "Anti-fascism, its definition, and personal relations", and "Politics", with a total of 24 Level 2 nodes, 21 sources, and 662 references.

<sup>225</sup> The continuity of the punk scene in Pula is best seen in their Monte Paradiso hardcore punk festival, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2017. Along with some younger members of the collective, most of the people who created and organised first Monte Paradiso festivals are still active in the punk scene in Pula.

<sup>226</sup> MYPLACE is an acronym for Memory, Youth, Political Legacy, and Civic Engagement. The project began in June 2011 and lasted until May 2015.

<sup>227</sup> This node was composed of eight Level 2 nodes: Anfema, Cultural influence on the ratio on the women and men in the scene and in general, Mutual support among women, Relations between males and females in general, Silenced chauvinism, Women's presence in the scene, Sexuality in general, Women and playing in bands. The last two nodes, Women's presence in the scene and Women and playing in bands had the most sources and references coded in this Level 1 node.

### 3. 'I think that things would have turned out differently if I were a man in the punk scene': gender issues in the punk scene

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, an anarcho-feminist group called *Anfema* was active in Zagreb. Although *Anfema* was primarily concerned with the position of women within the anarchist movement, the closeness and overlap between the anarchist and punk scenes in Zagreb at the time meant the vast majority of the group was active and present in the punk scene. Aside from opening a space for discussions of gender relations and issues in the anarchist and punk scenes, the group was organised street actions, published a fanzine entitled *WOMB*, translated and published a DIY gynaecological handbook, and organised workshops and the AnFemA festival (Strpić, 2011). Some of the respondents interviewed in this case study were active members of *Anfema*, who discussed why women on the scene<sup>228</sup> in the late 1990s formed this group. These reasons were mainly focused on the need to gather and discuss the existence of sexism in the scene, as well as relating their personal experiences and problems and planning gatherings and festivals. One of the respondents, Sonja, describes the need that arose among young women: "(...) they clearly felt the need for that, and there was that enormous energy there. We simply recognised that we all had the same problems, and that we had never discussed them before" (Sonja).

Another important topic respondents talked about was the "visibility" of women in the punk scene, noting that women are often more involved in organising concerts or events than in playing in bands and being directly present on the stage. This "visibility" was only mentioned in terms of being visible on the stage, but not in the scene and in other activities in general. Some respondents saw this as something that should be changed: "The reason I started playing was stupid; it was important for me to play as a girl on the scene, so I could be visible and so I could stimulate someone or... let's say recruit them, get them involved" (Sonja). Another respondent saw this as being "less important", saying "it's harder to organise a concert or work at a bar than to play in a band" (Max) and that "the punk scene exists because of the people behind the stage. The stage is a circus; everything else is what is important" (Max).

Sexuality on the scene, and especially the absence of discussion about it, is discussed as a general problem for members of the scene. This particularly applies to heteronormativity, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity, as well as sexual abuse. Some respondents talked about their experiences with how accepting the scene was when discussing gender identity and/or gender expression and experiences of sexual abuse, even within the scene. One respondent voiced reactions she experienced from members of the scene when she wrote in her fanzine about being sexually abused. She said that, after this text, she felt as if people on the scene "talked to me only because it was politically correct" (Sabina). She concluded that insensitivity towards such issues from people on the scene was one of the main problems, as was the punk scene not being a "safe place" in which to discuss this kind of topic. After writing about her experience in the fanzine, Sabina also organised a discussion of sexuality and sexual abuse in anarchist communities, at which some active punk scene members expressed dissatisfaction with idea that this topic should be discussed publicly. Another respondent remembered this discussion:

<sup>228</sup> The "scene" here refers to the punk scene.



*I clearly remember there was a moment during the discussion when I wanted to scream 'What the fuck is wrong with all of you?!' Firstly, who among you was raped? It is my right to talk about it, I believe it should be discussed! (...) it was terrible... it was terrible because I had the same experience, and it was even worse seeing how, when someone approached that subject... (silence)... people were really terrible* (Kiša).

Even though all respondents who discussed experiencing negative reactions from the people on the scene were critical of this, they stressed that they were not sure what kind of reaction they would get today. However, these experiences show that, even though punk scene (and anarchist scene) should be a “safe place for people with different experiences, especially those who were abused, it is still a part of a much broader set of values, values that are traditional and patriarchal – especially when it comes to sexuality” (Dergić, 2014, p. 19).

Although there were respondents who emphasised that they never encountered any form of discrimination in the punk scene, the majority of respondents believe gender issues are present and experienced through different forms of discrimination. As Kejt, Dita, and Dora said when discussing how they were perceived as women on the punk scene, what is common to the respondents is that they all believe they are seen as unequal to their male friends not only by male members of the scene, but female members as well: “I think some things would have turned out differently if I were a man on the punk scene” (Kejt). This led some respondents to criticise the apparent sexualisation of women who play in bands:

*It was never my goal to promote myself in this band, as if I was some kind of female object trying to attract men, but I guarantee you that other girls start from that... I am the girl, the 'chick' in the band. I play the role of femme fatale on the guitar... I don't like that sexual connotation that comes with the band, that's what pop stars are for!* (Dora).

Another question arising from this study is whether activism is a “women's thing”, or whether women overcome or enact traditional gender roles through activism. This question is raised because of the presumption that being actively involved in the punk scene (regardless of being active in bands, organising gigs, festivals, or other types of activism), women circumvent traditional social patterns that are imposed in order to them to keep them in the “private” rather than the “public” sphere of the society. In the context of the punk scene in Zagreb, it is apparent that, even though there are more men than women present and “visible” (referring here to stage presence) in the scene, there are more women who are directly involved in activism, organising various events regarding political issues, and making political statements. One respondent concluded that “there are more women in activism than men, and activism is something harder, much more responsible and realistic than playing in bands” (Max).



He also questioned the activity of women on the scene as being evidence of the absence of traditional gender roles, explaining how he sees women's "work in the backstage" on the scene:

*I think it's a cultural thing, a patriarchal thing – why are they willing to put their careers and obligations aside for some higher goal, which in conservative families means 'babies and prams', but which is activism and all that stuff in our context... It is interesting to see how traditional relations influence people, because men often crave that celebrity moment on stage. They like to drink free beer because they are considered a celebrity, they like that identity of the guy on the scene... And women are the ones willing to work in the background, to be anonymous activists (...) why aren't men willing to stand behind something they don't benefit from? Because if you're an activist, you're considered a cry-baby, and that often goes better with women than with men... Like, what the fuck? (Max).*

#### **4. Punk and politics: the fragmentation of the punk scene**

A perception of the punk scene as more focused on politics than music and entertainment proved widespread among our respondents. However, this should be considered in the context of an ethnography focused directly on the anti-fascist punk scene in Zagreb, and only few respondents were considered part of "another" scene. When mentioning "another scene", respondents usually discussed those (in the punk scene) who do not want to declare themselves politically or declare themselves a political punk band and/or individual. To have more general views on perceptions of politics, forms of political behaviour, activities, and practices, as well as meanings attached to different forms of political engagement in the punk scene, it would be necessary to conduct research that would involve these other groups.

The greatest fragmentation in the punk scene most often arises from whether or not someone believes it is important to politically declare oneself. This study shows that the vast majority of the respondents declared themselves as anti-fascist. Respondents often discussed anti-fascism not just as a political idea, but also as a "human attitude" (Purger), "a normal state of mind" (Murphy), or "a contemporary response to various forms of oppression and discrimination" (Max).

There is disagreement about what different terms (such as anti-fascist, apolitical, or anti-political) should represent in the context of the punk scene. For the respondents, this refers more to individuals or bands that declare themselves "apolitical" than those that declare themselves "anti-political". This is so because no bands that are openly declared right-wing or neo-Nazi in the punk scene in Croatia<sup>229</sup>. Those that declare themselves apolitical are often seen as "suspicious" by members of the scene. Although these bands do not declare themselves right-wing, their position is often perceived as

<sup>229</sup> In the past, there were several bands that would more or less publicly declare themselves RAC (Rock against Communism) or right-wing bands, such as H8, Strong Survive, and Treće poluvrijeme [Third Halftime].

“flirting” with right-wing politics. This term often has a negative connotation, as it is perceived as a “grey zone” (Brko, Max), and the people who represent it are considered a “suspicious crew” (Dora, Dita, Krasti) that is “not ready to take sides” (Max). Respondents often criticised this attitude, saying that “the problem in Europe in general is that apoliticism isn’t apoliticism, but rather tolerance for fascism” (Kova). Seeing the apolitical attitude as “conformism” (Purger) is the most common argument, especially among people who are politically active.

Even though all of the respondents declared themselves anti-fascist, some of them play in bands that are either declared apolitical, or simply keep their distance from politics. Some of those respondents think that punk should not interfere with political views, and some even listen to neo-Nazi punk bands: “I can say that sometimes I listen to *Skrewdriver*<sup>229</sup> (...) but it was never because of their political views” (Johnny). Most of the respondents strongly disagree with this “no mixing music and politics” attitude, saying that “Punk bands that can’t say they’re anti-fascist are suspicious to me” (Kejt). One respondent criticised this opinion, saying: “If you’re punk, it is important to be anti-fascist. I don’t see any other perspective on that, simply because of the entire social, historical, and musical context from which punk emerged” (Max). However, some respondents were critical of what is expected of them as a part of the scene, saying that political declaration is, in a way, a limitation: “The point of punk is that you can’t put something in a box” (Johnny). Regarding this fragmentation on the punk scene, the apparent division between anti-fascist and apolitical/anti-political members of the scene was often mentioned. When answering a question, one respondent even said “It depends on which punk scene you are talking about” (Johnny), emphasising differences among audiences at different concerts, or even differences between places where concerts were held, saying “you can see a big difference. You can see exactly the profile of people that go to those concerts” (Dora). Some respondents discussed differences between groups on the scene based on the subgenre of punk music they listen to. In accordance with post-subcultural theory, Purger calls those punks “hybrids”:

*There are lots of hybrids of all kinds here. You have those negative hybrids, neo-Nazi punks, next to those who are into modern tattoo, hardcore, hipsters, and then you have some serious anti-fascism. The opinions are so open that we have all those hybrid versions of everything* (Purger).

*Even though disagreement exists among members of these groups on the punk scene (those who believe punk should be politically active and those who think music and politics should not mix), there is no open tension or conflict between members of the punk scene in Zagreb. However, even though respondents criticise (and question) taking a neutral position on the topic of politics among members of the scene, when asked about politics in general, almost all of them described it as being “rotten”, “hypocritical”,*

<sup>230</sup> Skrewdriver was a neo-Nazi skinhead punk band from the UK, among otherthings, known for their frontman Ian Stuart, co-founder of the Blood and Honour network.

and “corrupt”. This is related to the perception of politics in everyday discourse, which led Kova to say “it is idiotic to say anti-political and apolitical, because those are both political attitudes (...) I think that when they say anti-political, they don’t see politics as a discourse of action; they’re thinking of HDZ and SDP<sup>231</sup> instead” (Kova).

## 5. Conclusion

While the prevalent political discourse in Croatia in the 1990s was nationalist, actors such as the *Croatia Anti-War Campaign* (Antiratna Kampanja Hrvatske) gave people the ability to mobilise politically in anti-war and anti-nationalist campaigns. Because of the intertwining and similarity in discourse between activists in the AWC and punk scene in Croatia, these two scenes (activism and punk) continued to evolve, linking music and anti-war and anti-nationalist politics (Perasović, 2001, 2012), thus resulting in the vast majority of the members of the punk scene accepting “the Crass paradigm” (MyKay, 1996). The research findings show disunity and fragmentation in the punk scene based on different perceptions of the importance of and need to politically declare oneself as individual or as a band. There is also dissent regarding whether punk should mix with politics. This could be linked to the fact that there are no active right-wing or neo-Nazi bands in the punk scene in Croatia; for this reason, the lack of a need to declare oneself politically, or declaring as “apolitical” or even “anti-political”, is often perceived as suspicious.

Regarding gender relations on the punk scene in Zagreb, women are not as present or “visible” on the scene as men. This refers more to being active “on the stage”, in bands, or even audience members than being engaged in activism and event organisation. This confirms the paradox discussed by Leblanc (2006) and Pilkington (2014) also confirms this, concluding that, even though the punk scene often represents political ideas that oppose different forms of limitations, when it comes to gender roles, it has failed to significantly oppose traditional gender regimes.

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<sup>231</sup> These are the two largest political parties in Croatia. HDZ (Hrvatska demokratska zajednica [Croatian Democratic Union] is the political party that is currently in power in Croatian Parliament, and SDP (Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske [Social Democratic Party of Croatia] is the largest opposition party.

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