MINOR THREAT & 'STRAIGHT EDGE'[1]

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I'm a person just like you.
But I've got better things to do.
Than sit around and fuck my head.
Hang out with the living dead.
Snort white shit up my nose.
Pass out at the shows.
I don't even think about speed.
That's something I just don't need.
I've got the straight edge.
I'm a person just like you.
But I've got better things to do.
Than sit around and smoke dope.
'Cause I know I can cope.
Laugh at the thought of eating 'ludes.
Laugh at the thought of sniffing glue.
Always gonna keep in touch.
Never want to use a crutch.
I've got the straight edge.
I've got the straight edge.
I've got the straight edge.
I've got the straight edge.
Minor Threat, Straight Edge, 1981

From Punk Rock to Straight Edge – Origins, context, and initial significance of 'Straight Edge'

No one could have predicted that Minor Threat's 46-second song, published in 1981, would spawn a worldwide movement of clean-living youth that still resonates over thirty years later. In fact, the idea that *not* smoking, drinking, doing drugs, and having casual sex would appeal to youth must have seemed preposterous

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[1] Chapter originally published by Ross Haenfler in the book: "Straight Edge – Minor Threat." In *Rebel Music: Resistance Through Hip Hop and Punk*, Priya Parmar, Anthony J. Nocella II, Scott Robertson, and Martha Diaz, eds, 2015, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishers.

following the hedonistic hippie and disco scenes of the '60 and '70s. The Counterculture encouraged experimentation of all kinds and bands such as the Velvet Underground made even heroin seem at once dangerous and sexy. Yet this song, born amidst a hardcore revolution, continues to inspire tens of thousands of people across the world, despite little promotion and almost no airplay. 'Straight edge' shows the powerful potential of music beyond moving people to dance to actually *moving* people to action.

Written in the context of a punk rock culture often saturated with drugs, the song reflected some punks' unease with the self-destructive 'no-future' attitude prevalent in the scene at the time. Minor Threat's Ian MacKaye, Jeff Nelson, Brian Baker, and Lyle Preslar grew up in the Washington, D.C., punk scene. They loved the countercultural spirit, the passionate music, the DIY ethic, and the question-everything mentality of punk, but did not appreciate the scene's more nihilistic tendencies. In part, 'Straight Edge' was a reaction to hard drug use that made the '77 punks' glue-sniffing seem quaint. In 1972 New York Dolls drummer Billy Murcia, drowned in the course of a drug overdose, began what would become a string of drug-related deaths of musicians connected to punk rock. The Sex Pistol's Sid Vicious died of a heroin overdose in 1979 and the Germs' Darby Crash followed suit a year later in an OD/suicide. Keith Morris of seminal hardcore band Black Flag and Mike Ness of Social Distortion were among many punk rockers who experimented with heroin and other drugs. While punk purported to be something different from the standard folk and stadium rock fare, in the drug department it offered up more of the same. Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison were only a few of the rising rock stars to have their lives cut short by drugs not long before punk's debut. Yet despite their disdain of hippies

and mainstream pop music, punks largely supplanted sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll with sex, drugs, and *punk* rock 'n roll. In a sense, straight edge became a counterculture within a counterculture, a way for punks to truly distinguish themselves. After all, if drinking and drug use are the norm, then *not* using becomes the new rebellion, the punkest way to be punk.

In 'Straight Edge', Ian MacKaye did not intend to generate a drug-free philosophy that would resonate with so many people over the course of thirty years; he intended, primarily, to challenge fellow punks and others in his local context that didn't accept his abstinence (Azerrad, 2001). He felt as if everyone in his high school was drinking and smoking pot, making *him* the outsider, and in that regard his fellow punks were no better. The young MacKaye explained in the 1984 Documentary *Another State of Mind*, 'When I became a punk my main fight was against the people that were around me, the kids, my friends that I saw and said 'God, I don't want to be like these people. I didn't feel like I fit in at all with them''. Still, what began as a song gradually became a movement as youth across the US adopted the straight edge lifestyle and identity, and bands such as Reno's 7 Seconds, Boston's SSD, and Los Angeles' Uniform Choice began promoting clean living in their lyrics. Eventually, youth began forming *straight edge bands* (e.g. Youth of Today) in which all members foreswore drugs and alcohol and took an active stance against intoxication. Since its beginnings in the 1980s, youth around the world, from Sweden to Argentina and South Africa to Indonesia, have taken up the straight edge identity. While 'Straight Edge' provided the name and the general spirit of the growing movement, another Minor Threat song, 1983's *Out of Step*, furnished its foundation: "(I) Don't Smoke, I don't drink, I don't fuck, At least I can fucking think." Straight edgers abstain, completely, from drinking alcohol,

using tobacco products, taking recreational drugs, and, in many cases, pursuing "casual" sex. They frame their choice as a lifetime commitment and most suggest that one sip of beer, one drag off a cigarette forfeits any claim to the identity. Most "straight edgers" have, at one time or another, displayed the movement's universal symbol, an X, scrawled in black magic marker on their hands or tattooed on their bodies. Straight edge clothing sports slogans such as "One Life Drug Free," "Poison Free," and "True 'Till Death," enabling straight edgers to literally wear their politics on their sleeves. While straight edge traces its roots to hardcore music, today you can find adherents in hip hop, metal, indie, and other scenes. Some dress like old-school punks, some like hardcore kids, some adopt emo, skater, and hipster fashions, and others blend in with their more mainstream peers.

In the remainder of the chapter, I discuss how "Straight Edge" and the movement it inspired challenge drug and alcohol culture, how such resistance is symbolic of a larger cultural resistance, and how straight edge exemplifies a lifestyle movement encouraging adherents to take action in their daily lives.

Resisting drug culture … and more

First and foremost, straight edge, both the song and the movement, challenge the taken-for-granted role of intoxicating substances in many cultures. Alcohol is part of virtually every social event, from dinner parties and barbecues to baseball games and weddings. We learn that alcohol is useful for celebrating and mourning, getting to know people and getting laid. This is particularly true for youth, perhaps especially on college campuses. While not all college students drink, and many drink responsibly, getting wasted has long been woven into the fabric of college life, so much so that many colleges and universities

consider "binge drinking" one of the most significant problems on campus. In such contexts, drinking becomes just 'what you do', without a lot of thought put into why.

For generations of young people, drugs were subversive, a symbolic and sensual separation from their elders' staid, conformist, even oppressive ideas. The Beats and the hippies believed certain drugs could expand consciousness, providing insights and experiences otherwise unreachable. So when MacKaye sings "I've got better things to do / Than sit around and fuck my head / Hang out with the living dead" he is reframing intoxication as a stupid waste of time, something that *fucks* you up rather than *lifts* you up. The "living dead" are *less* in tune with the world, zombies under a spell. Given the pressure many young people feel to drink, smoke, or use drugs to fit in, to be "cool," in challenging substance use "Straight Edge" upends one of the central tenets of youth, suggesting the popularity game itself is laughable. This basic idea – that doing something just because everyone else is doing it is absurd – underlies much of straight edge politics.

While straight edgers criticize the personal costs of drug, tobacco, and alcohol abuse, they also typically allow that individual users are caught in a larger, exploitative system. Alcohol and tobacco companies spend big money to hook young people on their products. For decades, the cigarette industry suppressed or denied smoking's negative health effects. They designed Joe Camel, the Marlboro Man, and more recently, flavored cigarettes to lure in younger smokers, hoping they get addicted young and become lifetime customers. Ruling in favor of the Justice Department's RICO suit against tobacco companies, U.S. District Court Judge Gladys Kessler described how they actively sought younger people as "replacement smokers" to fill in for those who

quit or died off. Kessler wrote, "[the] Defendants have marketed and sold their lethal product with zeal, with deception, with a single-minded focus on their financial success, and without regard for the human tragedy or social costs that success exacted" (http://www.justice.gov/civil/cases/tobacco2/amended%20opinion.pdf). While the straight edge movement encourages individuals to take personal responsibility for their own sobriety, many adherents also acknowledge the deck is stacked against young people, that alcohol and drug culture is bigger than individual choices.

Additionally, while "Straight Edge" focuses on drug use, even from its inception the straight edge movement, like punk, encouraged critical thinking on a broader scale. Refusing drugs was symbolic, for many, of a greater resistance to "conventional" society and youth culture (Haenfler, 2004a). As MacKaye described seeing the Cramps play at his first punk rock show, "Every given was really challenged at this gig. At that moment I realized here was a community that was politically confrontational, that was theologically confrontational, that was artistically confrontational, that was sexually confrontational, physically confrontational, musically confrontational" (Azzerad, 2001: 122). Gradually, many straight edgers, like their punk brethren, molded and refined their general oppositional consciousness into opposing violence, sexism, corporate power, environmental destruction and so on. For example, many straight edge kids adopt vegetarian or vegan lifestyles, viewing their personal choices as a collective challenge to animal cruelty. They report that being drug-free gives them a "clear mind" with which to better see society's illusions, oppressions, and injustices (Haenfler, 2006). A clear mind, they claim, increases their ability to control their circumstances and make countercultural choices.

Pursuing a clear mind – pop culture, drugs, alcohol and cultural hegemony

'Straight Edge' bluntly suggests that sobriety, i.e. being straight, provides one an edge, an advantage over everyone else: 'I've got the straight edge." MacKaye explained, "It's not saying I'm better. It's saying I got my head straight, I've got my shit together, and that's why I've got the advantage on you" (*Another State of Mind*). Contrary to the hippies, straight edgers pursue self-actualization via a Prof Paula *clear* mind rather than mind-altering substances. The lines 'Always gonna keep in touch / Never want to use a crutch" suggest that people use drugs and alcohol as escapist tools to avoid problems and, perhaps, as a *shortcut* to enlightenment. Clean living, straight edgers argue, requires being in touch with one's emotions, facing one's problems head on. As MacKaye says, "I always knew life was precious and that I wanted to be present for every moment'. But the spirit of straight edge, as MacKaye intimates, was about more than pot, booze, and sex. It was about being an individual in a society that manufactures conformity, a society drunk not only on liquor but also *Survivor* and *Spongebob Squarepants*, professional wrestling and porn.

The fast, abrasive music exemplified by 'Straight Edge', the manic delivery, and the frenetic dancing at shows issued a sonic and embodied challenge to pop musical conventions. As a *hardcore* song, "Straight Edge' offered, like the larger punk scene, a DIY alternative to the stadium rock fare popular at the time. But what does such a challenge ultimately accomplish? Academics and subculturists alike have long debated the role of pop culture in our lives – is it harmless entertainment, a simple escape from our workaday lives? Or does it lull us into passivity, numbing us to social injustices while turning us into insatiable consumers?

Sociologists and philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (2002(1944)) theorized a *culture industry* that mass produces relatively standardized cultural goods – TV shows, movies, magazines, music - for mass consumption, in a sense stupefying people and making them easier to manipulate. Content after a long work day to settle in for a beer and an episode of *Law and Order*, the average person then a) fails to see the larger oppressive systems in which she/he exists and participates; b) falls prey to misinformation, stereotypes, consumerism, and propaganda; or c) pays attention to the world's problems but, presented with few solutions or ways to get involved, feels powerless to do anything about them and so disengages. Addicted, in a way, not only to soda and potato chips but also to mental junk food, too many of us take capitalism for granted and find politics a bore. Which is exactly what those with power and privilege count on, exercising a form of soft power in which people argue the merits of the latest reality TV show contestants in lieu of demanding fairness and justice. For critical theorists such as Adorno and Horkheimer, pop music, and pop culture in general, were just another means of pacifying the masses; even education, politics, and religion fall victim to the entertainment imperative as open political discourse gives way to 'amusing ourselves to death' (Postman, 2005). Alcohol, tobacco, and drugs are marketed as youth 'rebellion', despite being integral to most mainstream social gatherings. Following this logic, alcohol might be just another component of *mass culture*, part of a homogenized set of experiences promoted via the media for the sake of profiting from the highest number of consumers. If *American Idol* and *America's Next Top Model* can grip the nation's consciousness, imagine what mind-altering substances can do? While later scholarship challenges the portrayal of people as passive media consumers and uncritical cultural dopes (e.g. Jenkins, 1992, 2006), straight

edge offers an actionable statement of defiance to perceived cultural hegemony.

But does a clear mind *really* give adherents an "edge?" Is straight edgers' cultural challenge significant and meaningful, or is straight edge just another social scene that reproduces the same tired social patterns in an X'd up form? Clearly straight edgers display a certain degree of arrogance in thinking a clear mind automatically gives one an edge over others, and it's not as if people who smoke and drink are automatically politically disengaged. Scholars of youth culture have long debated the significance of *youth resistance*. British researchers associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (also knows as the Birmingham School) viewed youth subcultures such as skinheads and punks as working class youth engaged in symbolic resistance against their subordinate social position (e.g. Hebdige, 1979; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Such youth resisted upper class *hegemony*, the monopoly on privilege and power, via their spectacular styles and rituals. However, according to the Birmingham School, their resistance was ultimately illusory, resolving none of the underlying inequalities and injustices. A spiky leather jacket, bondage gear, and a mohawk may startle conventional onlookers, and even upend fashion conventions, but do little to reduce social inequality. (In fact, being a punk may *reinforce* one's subordinate position.) Likewise, not drinking and using may be personally beneficial, but straight edge's emphasis on self-control and abstinence reflects values found in mainstream religious circles.

From the outset, some punks did not take kindly to straight edgers, finding them boring and conservative at best, arrogant and self-righteous at worst (O'Hara, 2001). "Bent edge" groups heckled Minor Threat at shows. After all, the very idea of a set of *rules* ran counter punk's "no rules!" ethos, though MacKaye

insisted in "Out of Step" that "this is no set of rules," suggesting that he was merely screaming about his personal choices in response to the flack he took for being straight. Still, while the overwhelming majority of adherents condemn violence, the judgmental, holier-than-thou straight edge 'tough guy' became the most visible face of straight edge in some scenes, as well as in the mainstream media. A minority of straight edgers has enforced its credo with violence, forming straight edge "crews" and picking fights. Such hypermasculine behavior marginalizes women, painting a contradictory portrait of a supposedly anti-sexist, "positive" subculture (Haenfler, 2004b). Perhaps the counter-hegemonic potential of music scenes, and songs like "Straight Edge," is rather limited. How we judge the impact of music depends in part upon how we conceptualize social change.

Straight edge as a Lifestyle Movement

What does 'Straight Edge' teach us about pursuing social change? Popular images of social change tend towards the dramatic: *social movements* – such as civil rights – or *revolutions* – such as the Arab uprisings – accomplish "real" change, while subcultures related to music scenes are simply temporary playgrounds for adolescents. Straight edge challenges such assumptions in several ways, illustrating a different sort of politics, a politics focused less on activist organizations engaging in public protest against the government and more on informally connected individuals making (relatively) private, personal choices directed at culture norms. In this sense, straight edge is a *lifestyle movement*, a "loosely bound [collectivity] in which participants advocate lifestyle change as a primary means to social change" (Haenfler *et al.*, 2012: 14). Voluntary simplicity, slow food, virginity pledge, locovore, and fair trade movements are other prominent examples. In the tradition

of feminists, anarchists, environmentalists, and others, straight edge illustrates that the *personal is political*, breaking down the dichotomy between personal and social transformation. What distinguishes this sort of politics from simple lifestyle choices is its outward focus and the recognition that one's personal decisions, taken in concert with likeminded others, add up to a collective challenge. In other words, adopting a vegan lifestyle solely for personal health is different from understanding such a diet as a political act in defiance of corporate agribusiness and animal cruelty.

'Advertising" one's lifestyle politics, whether through evangelism or simply leading by example, opens up possibilities for others to take similar action. Many straight edgers, especially younger ones, openly display their affiliation, certainly to show their "subcultural capital', but also as a statement against alcohol and drug culture (Thornton, 1995; Haenfler 2004a, 2006). They sew Xs on their school bags, paste stickers on their cars, wear them on their clothes, and tattoo Xs on their bodies (Atkinson 2003; Wood 2006). The very act of recording 'Straight Edge' and making the song public demonstrates an intention to challenge social convention. Anyone, presumably, can abstain from drugs, tobacco, and alcohol; on some level, being drug-free is simply a lifestyle choice. However, the act of making that choice public, of leading by example, of creating possibilities for others, transforms straight edge from just another personal choice into a cultural challenge. Critics may charge straight edge kids with being 'preachy' – and sometimes they are. But surely alcohol and tobacco ads, or 'ladies night' and other promotions so common we take them for granted, constitute 'preaching' on a much larger scale.

For some straight edgers, the identity's meaning begins and ends with abstinence. When straight edge resistance stops at exchanging bar culture for hardcore shows, then perhaps straight edge is little more than a social club (although carving out a cultural space for youth who don't drink, but also don't fit in, to feel accepted, be creative, and have fun is no trivial accomplishment). When people's efforts begin and end with tweaks to their diet and consumption, they may lose sight of the big picture and bask in self-satisfaction. However, as I have shown, many straight edgers connect their clean living commitment and identity to other issues, seeing such concerns as a logical progression from having a "clear mind." Some even join their edge identity to radical activism, feminism, anarchism, queer politics, anti-fascism, global democracy protests, and so on (see Kuhn, 2010). Many straight edgers have taken punk's DIY ethic and straight edge's clean living as a call to accomplish bigger goals, to live outside the box, to go against the grain, and to engage the world more fully. The point is that not all efforts at change take place in the streets or the halls of Congress. Lifestyle movements help shift the cultural discourse, can change dominant relationships, and encourage people to take action in their daily lives. They also serve as a bridge to more traditional political participation and protest politics. 'Straight Edge' is about resisting dominant expectations and taking some measure of responsibility for creating alternatives - DIY applies not just to making music, but also to generating social change.

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