

Working for the Clampdown: The Clash, The Dawn of Neoliberalism, and the Political Promise of Punk. Edited by Colin Coulter (Manchester University Press, 2019). Pp. 248. Paper, \$29.00

In 1977, Mark Perry, creator of punk fanzine *Sniffin' Glue*, declared that punk died the day that The Clash signed to CBS Records. Still, the band's career continued with broad acclaim, and punk, led by The Clash, remains a globally popular youth sub-culture. As a major label, politically minded, and highly influential punk band, The Clash provides a potent case study of the dichotomies and intersections of punk and the rise of a neoliberal era. Accordingly, *Working for the Clampdown: The Clash, The Dawn of Neoliberalism, and the Political Promise of Punk* strings together diverse disciplinary approaches that illuminate how The Clash represented and undermined cultural currents of the late-twentieth century. The particular challenge of this book, as the editor Colin Coulter acknowledges, is to strike a balance between personal veneration for the music of the Clash and critique of the band's politics and place in punk history. Although such a basis for exploration may stir trepidation among historians, the interdisciplinary collection of essays in *Working for the Clampdown* offers a fresh lens for cultural historians who engage with the implications of neoliberalism.

Coulter's introduction describes Britain's political and economic upheaval of the 1970s with a dramatic rise in oil prices, factories turning toward three-day work weeks, and soaring unemployment. Neoliberalism, a new ideology, arose with a set of policies that purported to solve this crisis: free market trade, deregulation of financial markets, mercantilism, and the reduction of state welfare programs. Coulter positions The Clash as critics of a Thatcherite neoliberal order whose punk polemics present a window into cultural opposition. He also recognizes the band's major label contracts without offering how The Clash might fit within or uphold neoliberalism. Hence, Coulter leaves interpretative space for contributors to fill when it comes to defining cultural characteristics of neoliberalism and where the band stands in relation to them. While some authors avoid addressing neoliberalism directly, the differing and occasional conflicting interpretations reveal the strength of the book: it complicates and intertwines The Clash with the "dawn of neoliberalism."

Freedom to interpret ties between neoliberalism and culture allow authors to examine The Clash as both a critique of the neoliberal order, and as a commodity within in it. For instance, Pete Dale argues that the musicianship of The Clash's members illustrates the band's paradoxical relationship to neoliberalism as a political rightward turn. After positing that the band's musical novelty was a basis for promoting leftist politics, Dale cogently concludes that guitarist Keith Levene's departure from the band had likely reduced their ingenuity in songwriting and thus, the efficiency in transmitting the band's politics. If Dale suggests novel music-making may present a way of challenging neoliberalism, Caroline Coon seeks to debunk a do-it-yourself egalitarian punk ethic purported by singer Joe Strummer. Despite the band's explicit association with leftist politics, Coon contends that The Clash rightfully benefitted from neoliberalism. She asserts approvingly that a neoliberal free market offers ideal conditions for the rising popularity of musicians based on technical skill and that those conditions do not dilute political messaging. Possessing musical competency and a strong work ethic, The Clash acted within a corporate sphere to advance dialectical political commentary, according to Coon. Since the band's success took place within the masculine neoliberal realm, the feminist proclivities of the band's members, as Coon points out, were not enough "to ask that these

young men...would also stand up against the so far indelibly patriarchal world as full-time feminists” (63-64). Coon thus provides a unique interpretation of The Clash as not at odds with neoliberalism but benefiting and working within it in order to better, not upend, it. Highlighting neoliberalism as politically and economically transformative and reviving cultural historical debate, Jason Toyne explores The Clash’s place within a Marxist model of base and superstructure. This approach recognizes their creative and “potentially political autonomy” (47). Even so, Toyne argues, the reaffirmation of capitalist class power through working within neoliberalism challenged the “exemplary” activism of The Clash.

Locality provides another conceptual tool to understand the historical significance of The Clash. Although the band’s lyrics stress far-reaching political interests in global issues, The Clash remained a distinctively English band based in London. Without undermining the global influence of the band, Conrad Brunström emphasizes the significance of London’s Westway as a site of mass transit that informed the band thematically, socio-politically, and rhythmically. Brunström draws attention to ways in which the band embraced reggae as “an instrumental technique of ‘dropping out’” symbolic of “a road that drops down into London [into] a neighborhood that is... saturated with reggae” (169). Moreover, Brunström underscores ways that Joe Strummer employed London’s urban deracination as a representation of authenticity in lyrics and imagery. Alternatively, Giacomo Bottà and Ferruccio Quercetti question the band’s authenticity by contrasting it with do-it-yourself elements of punk. They emphasize critiques by Italian punks who saw the major-label marketization of The Clash as not only a failure but a threat to their political beliefs. Many Italian punks found that British anarchist bands such as Crass and Poison Girls better signified authentic and leftist political ideals of punk. Nevertheless, Brunström points out, The Clash never wholly represented a definable community. Rather, “they were a confusion of communities...uncertain as to which proximate battle was most urgent” (170).

Working for the Clampdown stands as a necessary read for scholars interested in punk sub-culture. It also provides an important contribution to developing scholarship on the intersection of neoliberalism and culture. Within the last decade, particularly in light of Timothy Taylor’s studies of music and capitalism, scholars have developed a growing interest in the ways in which neoliberalism influences music.¹ While recent scholarship emphasizes neoliberal marketization and production as well as subversion through independent and localized music scenes, *Working for the Clampdown* muddies clear distinctions between compliance with and resistance to neoliberalism. For historians, who increasingly look toward historicizing the neoliberal era, the collection impels employing neoliberalism as a framework for studying the entwining of economic, political, and cultural histories of the 1970s. As the inveterate nature of neoliberalism and cultural efforts to subvert it present fertile ground for continued debate, the book offers accessible accounts of that process through the lens of the era’s most influential punk band.

¹ Timothy D. Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (University of Chicago Press, 2016); Timothy D. Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2012).

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