

The Case of Sex Pistols as an Expression of Nihilism in Society

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doi:10.63593/AS.2709-9830.2026.03.004

Abstract

Nihilism is arguably one of the most discussed concepts in philosophy, especially in times still relatively close to us, after Friedrich Nietzsche theorised and wrote extensively about it in the second half of the 19th century. Besides representing a set of ideas and a philosophical current, it can be regarded as coinciding with a human condition — an individual's response to life and society which results from or in perceiving them as meaningless, in an overall context where moral truths or values are rejected or not believed to exist. This implies that nihilism not only has an abstract nature but also a concrete one, which can translate into forms of expression such as literature and art, as well as music. This is precisely what the present paper aims to show, by starting with a brief introductory analysis of the Beat Generation and then moving to the field of music with a more thorough examination of punk rock band Sex Pistols' case. Indeed, both serve as an example of how a literary and cultural movement and a music phenomenon respectively can be permeated by and propagate nihilistic traits which consist in alienating from the purposeless modern society and its conventions as well as protesting against it, while promoting personal liberation and nonconformism.

Keywords: nihilism, society, Beat Generation, Sex Pistols

1. Introduction

Nihilism has been discussed since the most remote epochs, even prior to the emergence of Greek philosophy. It was only through the theorisation of Friedrich Nietzsche, however, that the theme assumed a fundamental role in the development of modern thought. In order to provide readers with some points of reference, should they wish to pursue the subject further, there are several figures who are associated with the concept of nihilism and are worth exploring. In fact, the list is extensive and includes thinkers and writers such as Friedrich H. Jacobi, Arthur Schopenhauer, Giacomo Leopardi, Max Stirner, Ivan Turgenev, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Martin Heidegger, Karl Löwith, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Emanuele Severino, Gianni Vattimo and Umberto Galimberti. Such a list is sufficient for the purpose stated above; nonetheless, it is by no means comprehensive.

It should be emphasised that the concept of nihilism has been developed in every conceivable manner and has consequently assumed a variety of forms across numerous fields and disciplines. One is therefore confronted with a theme of immense breadth and complexity. Without presuming to exhaust the subject, among the various domains in which nihilism has exerted its influence, it is fitting that we mention metaphysics, epistemology, mereology, art (particularly contemporary art) and literature, as well as the existential and the moral spheres. The diverse nihilistic landscape has not spared the world of music. Indeed, nihilism permeates modern musical culture, with punk rock being emblematic of this, if we think of some of the most representative bands of this genre, such as Sex Pistols and Siouxsie and the Banshees (Healy, 2024).

It is precisely on music considered in relation to its broader social context — and more specifically on the case of Sex Pistols — that the present article intends to focus. This will be preceded by an analysis of the Beat Generation as a movement that was tinged with a nihilistic tone, where 'negation, refusal, and withdrawal

function not as passive retreats but as active forms of critique against thoroughly administered, conformist societies' (Giannakakis, 2026: 1).

2. Discussion

It may appear unusual that we should devote particular attention to nihilism expressed through music; however, our choice is motivated by the opportunity to examine a concrete phenomenon. Many other forms of nihilistic thought have remained confined within predominantly speculative and philosophical spheres, never emerging from the realm of abstraction. Owing to their highly theoretical character, such discussions often remained inaccessible, circulating exclusively within restricted intellectual circles and frequently resisting easy comprehension. Musical phenomena, by contrast, offer a more immediate interpretative framework and exert a direct influence upon the behaviour of young people, who often find inspiration and an outlet for their instincts, anxieties, uncertainties and existential crises especially in the type of music discussed in this paper. In the Introduction, we have mentioned punk rock, but nihilism also concerns other genres, such as the black metal one that emerged in Scandinavia in the late 1980s, which, according to the American Underground Nihilist Association, was characterised by 'nihilism and a heroic antisocial assertion of the self' (Michalewicz, 2007: 211).

In this section, we shall aim to demonstrate the extent to which ostensibly non-committed music becomes embedded within socio-cultural contexts, to the point of shaping entire generations through distinctive traits that influence lifestyles, mental structures and radical behavioural transformations. In this regard, one may recall the Beat Generation, which achieved worldwide prominence during the 1950s and 1960s, while also retaining its identity in subsequent decades. The merit for coining the expression belongs to Jack Kerouac, although he acknowledged that he had first encountered the word 'beat' through Herbert Huncke. The term derives from 'beaten down' (Varner, 2012: 1), indicating a condition of exhaustion or oppression, such as that experienced by the characters in Kerouac's 1957 play *Beat Generation*, centred upon the working-class inhabitants of New York's Bowery district (ibid.: 20). In the book *Conversations with Kerouac* (Aronowitz, 2005: 31), the writer explains that he initially understood the term 'beat' to signify 'poor and sleeping in subways'. Subsequently, while visiting the church in which he had received the sacrament of confirmation, he knelt in silence and realised that 'beat' also evoked 'beatitude' and 'beatific'. He therefore stated, 'I was beatific in the church', meaning that he experienced a profound sense of blessedness within that sacred space (ibid.). In a 1958 interview reported in the aforementioned source, Kerouac explained that being 'beat' entailed an awareness of life and religion, referring to the return to mysticism prophesied by Oswald Spengler and to visions of God facilitated, in some cases, through the use of narcotic substances (Wallace, 2005: 3-4). This latter aspect is likewise discussed by Varner (2012: 85) in the section entitled *Drugs*.

Before long, the term 'beat' became almost synonymous with rebellion and came to identify a specific social stratum engaged in the struggle to assert its rights. The Beat Generation consequently became a symbol of youth protest beginning in the 1950s, particularly in opposition to the Vietnam War. Subsequently, it expanded its activism to encompass racial, sexual and ethnic discrimination, adopting positions in defence of the less privileged social classes. Advocates of the Beat Generation encouraged spontaneous and extemporaneous creativity in the arts, while traditional methods, norms and standardised systems were rejected and opposed. Kerouac significantly valued instinctive creativity in music, above all in jazz, a genre conducive to reflection and therefore perfectly suited to the social sensibilities of the early Beat ideology.

The movement subsequently achieved widespread resonance across much of the globe and, by the time it faded, music had broadened its sphere of influence, becoming the ideal vehicle through which increasingly anomic, rebellious, nonconformist and libertarian generations could be shaped, often to the very threshold of anarchism. Several years later, a similar context proved to be remarkably fertile for the emergence of Sex Pistols, whom we have decided to discuss because, in our view, they perfectly embodied the imperatives of the Zeitgeist, i.e. the spirit of the age. Their live debut occurred in 1975, yet most of the United Kingdom remained unaware of their existence until 1st December 1976, when they appeared intoxicated during a live television interview and used extremely offensive language (Utton, 2012).¹ By the following day, the band made the headlines of many major newspapers. This incident, together with other forms of behaviour deemed unacceptable by their record label EMI — including insulting and spitting at people and airline staff during a tour — led the company to terminate their £40,000 contract after merely two months of adverse publicity generated by the group (Knewstub, 1977/2011).

Punk rock soon came to be regarded as 'unsophisticated, raw, and aggressive', while the manager of Sex Pistols, the shopkeeper Malcolm McLaren, openly declared his support for anarchism and claimed that the band sought to 'destroy society and start again' (ibid.). Such tendencies were portrayed by Derek Jarman in his 1977 film

¹ This episode is also documented on the official website of Sex Pistols: <https://www.sexpistolsofficial.com/bio/>.

Jubilee, described by Jeffries (2007) as a dystopian satire capturing the nihilism and politically provocative attitude of the punk scene; among other targets, the film mocked the celebrations of the Silver Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II. Confirmation of what we have just asserted can be found in several of the band's lyrics, including the phrase 'no future' in *God Save the Queen*, together with 'I am an anti-Christ' and the imperative 'destroy' in *Anarchy in the U.K.*

One may reasonably ask why Sex Pistols achieved such notable success, despite proving little more than a meteoric phenomenon within the musical landscape, rising rapidly in 1976 only to self-destruct by 1978 (Kallen, 2012: 44).¹ They were widely regarded as a fraud, both because of the image they projected and, above all, because of their limited musical competence — a fact in which they themselves appeared to take pride during their performances. How is such a phenomenon to be explained? Not everything necessarily conforms to rational logic, particularly when one enters the inscrutable realm of individual and collective responses to external stimuli and provocations. Nevertheless, it appears certain that practical action exerts a far stronger impact than theoretical discourse, especially when the latter requires engagement with texts that are not always readily accessible and prescribes ethical or moral norms intended to improve interpersonal relations and society as a whole. It would not be unreasonable to argue that, in terms of behavioural transformation — above all, among the young — the impact of Sex Pistols and punk music was far greater than that of figures such as Auguste Comte, author of *System of Positive Polity* (1851-1854). Through this work, Comte inaugurated sociology and considered himself a new prophet destined to transform the obsolete structure of society by means of a positive religion. In effect, he conceived a form of 'social physics', by which he intended a new scientifically grounded ethics. Yet it is highly improbable that any theory should take root rapidly; indeed, it may fail to gain recognition even in the long term, as occurred not only with Comte but with many others.

Unfortunately, it is praxis that ultimately prevails, even though it frequently allies itself with the illusion that specific objectives may be achieved while bypassing the indispensable stages of gradual development. What is lacking is the disposition to accept the natural slowness required by any radical social renewal. Similarly, reason, perseverance and determination rarely become the foundations of social transformation. Instead, instinct alone governs action, demanding everything immediately and with minimal effort, precisely because it dispenses with intellectual and material commitment. Herein lies the explanation for the international success of Sex Pistols, who transformed instinct into their principal weapon: unconscious participants in, and products of, a nihilistic philosophy that was simultaneously pessimistic and decadent. Rejecting every law, rule, ethic, morality, religion and political ideology, they even expressed scepticism and disillusionment towards every revolutionary aspiration. Yet they themselves constituted a form of revolution, albeit unconsciously and devoid of any genuine certainty.

The behavioural and musical precariousness of the band also proved to be its principal limitation. As previously noted, the group existed only briefly and did not engage in significantly extensive concert activity. During their performances, they privileged aesthetics and improvisation over adherence even to the conventions found in rock music up until those years. Their basic criterion was to follow instinct, producing a form of sound-noise corresponding to the emotional state of the moment, with distorted power chords and a non-melodic way of singing at a relentless pace. In *The History of Alternative Rock*, Kallen (2012: 48) points out that Sid Vicious often performed while intoxicated and under the influence of amphetamines and heroin; he further observes that, since Vicious was incapable of playing the bass guitar adequately, his role was essentially that of a performance artist and 'quintessential punk rock maniac'. Politically, the band displeased both the Right and the Left alike, displaying deep contradictions in its spontaneous declarations and ostentatious use of symbols. Amid a confused amalgam of violence, total subversion, terrorism and anarchism, the group adorned itself with swastikas, images evoking Karl Marx and slogans such as 'chaos' (Savage, 2012).

Within this peculiar ideological syncretism and nebulous accumulation of fragmentary ideas, a nihilistic and decadent aura still remained unmistakable, immortalised in the song *God Save the Queen*, which concludes, as previously mentioned, with the emblematic phrase 'no future'. Despite everything, the band became an icon not only for its own generation but for many that followed. The main explanation for this lies in socio-economic conditions. For the United Kingdom, 1975 suddenly became an *annus horribilis*, even though only a decade had passed since the optimism linked to the flourishing era of Swinging London. To many young people, the future appeared profoundly precarious and lacking in any prospects amid a climate of total crisis: unemployment, recession and an economy on the brink of collapse characterised the latter half of the 1970s. Among the less affluent sectors of society, everyday hardship reached critical levels, eventually manifesting itself in intense protest movements bordering upon subversion and frequently encouraging acts of violence. A model capable of inspiring and mobilising such discontent became necessary, and Sex Pistols emerged as the ideal archetype. The

¹ These events are also reported on the official website of Sex Pistols: <https://www.sexpistolsofficial.com/bio/>.

aggression that characterised their concerts fuelled demonstrations that often escalated into genuine popular uprisings.

Yet a negative point of reference, such as Sex Pistols, could only generate further negativity. Consequently, although protest may have been legitimate, it frequently degenerated into violence devoid of constructive purpose: merely a release valve for disturbed emotional states, rarely animated by authentically cathartic aspirations or profound demands for social justice. What, then, is the key to understanding why the band became historically influential and attracted such widespread followers, despite their anomalous manner of “not making” music? Why should Sex Pistols appear in relation to the subject of nihilism, alongside figures whose cultural stature reached the highest intellectual levels?

The explanation lies in the fact that they represented a concrete reflection of the human psyche which, when confronted with obstacles perceived as insurmountable, often chooses the drastic solution of annihilating both itself and others through irrational and irreversible destruction. According to this logic, if evil prevails, it is preferable that it should extend to its extreme limits and engulf humanity as a whole, thereby striking even those genuinely responsible for it. At the same time, the interpretative core also resides in human maximalism, particularly during youth, when individuals desire everything immediately, without passing through demanding stages of strategic planning, rational organisation and educational formation prior to praxis. This would entail that, all things considered, the Leninist maximalist solution is better than the gradualism associated with Marxian thought, and so is Bolshevik maximalism in comparison with Alexander Kerensky’s Menshevism. For instance, in Italy many Marxists — who were not exactly Marxian in a strict sense — preferred the rigid ideological dogmatism of Amadeo Bordiga to the gradualist educational and cultural approach of Antonio Gramsci, whom the main representatives of the Italian Communist Party progressively marginalised. They reductively classified him as little more than an intellectual and journalist, co-founder of the Turin newspaper *L'Ordine Nuovo*, who concerned himself with communism only incidentally. Consequently, he was no longer seen as a true Marxist and therefore deemed incapable of pursuing the ideals of revolutionary radicalism. Similarly, against the gradualist Minimum Programme of Filippo Turati, the more radical Italian Left decisively opposed the Maximum Programme of the revolutionary socialists led by Benito Mussolini, who at that time was certainly more Leninist than Marxian.

From what has been stated, albeit in a highly-condensed form, it becomes evident that the political landscape, irrespective of historical period, is always immensely complex and far from cohesive. As a result, the possibility of planning a truly effective subversive revolution becomes virtually impossible. Therefore, it can be argued that it is inconceivable that the revolution associated with Sex Pistols could ever have laid the foundations for a genuinely destabilising political movement. In reality, theirs was a revolution of customs and lifestyles rather than of the masses, influencing only a certain segment of unruly and undisciplined youth. Squatters and reckless imitators of their idols, who were victims of unfavourable social conditions, pushed their reactive tendencies to extremes. These were individuals intent solely upon destruction, without any clear understanding either of the true targets to be struck or of how to transform society into a more equitable system. It must also be acknowledged that, alongside social hardship and youthful intemperance, another factor contributed to violence and uncontrolled deviance: mass psychology, which is invariably destructive, especially when exacerbated by excessive alcohol and drug consumption, as occurred both among the members of Sex Pistols and within the broader punk culture that emerged with them.

We would not wish our observations to create the impression that we are approaching the social phenomenon under discussion with critical superficiality. On the contrary, we believe that every collective phenomenon deserves rigorous analysis and interpretation free from prejudice. Punk should not be regarded as marginal, in that it constitutes, in its own way, a historical fact embedded within the persistent and often paradoxical dynamics that have always characterised societies across time and space. It would be far too simplistic to dismiss punk music merely as uncultivated and subversive. Even Adorno (2004), an eminent philosopher as well as an accomplished musician and musicologist, maintained in his work *Philosophy of Modern Music* that every musical product enters fully into historical dialectics. As such, it reflects the fears, anxieties, anguish and aspirations of a given age. How, then, could one fail to recognise punk music — particularly that of Sex Pistols — as the outcome of the pervasive nihilism characteristic of that period? As always, the interpretation of social events remains difficult and often elusive, owing to the complexity that defines reality as the product of the multifaceted dimensions of human behaviour. On the one hand stands the individual, naturally inclined towards solipsism (indeed, Thomas Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, explicitly emphasises humanity’s egoistic nature); on the other persists an enduring conflict among peoples as well as a humanity seemingly incapable of transcending the eternal dichotomy between exploiters and exploited. This disturbing structure of human society appears to admit neither a plausible explanation nor a justification, as though both categories were somehow physiologically indispensable to the very survival of the species.

3. Conclusions

Clearly, we shall not attempt to provide definitive interpretative keys to a phenomenon that has never appeared fully decipherable. Nevertheless, insofar as our abilities permit, we shall endeavour to explain the persistence of nihilism, the reasons why both individuals and masses retain bestial elements within themselves, the drive towards destruction at any cost, the increasingly concentrated monopoly of the planet's wealth, the exploitation of resources and the intensification of social inequalities. Frequently, the explanation is reduced to commonplaces that ostensibly say everything while in reality saying nothing, by identifying the cause in the fact that today's people and society have lost the values of the past. Although history demonstrates that the world remains fundamentally unchanged, it is nevertheless possible to propose an interpretative framework capable of clarifying why, over the past forty years, the social order has undergone such severe regression.

Returning briefly to punk, we can observe that, amid the general turmoil of the 1970s, it functioned as both expression and echo of nihilism through communicative processes that are characteristic of Postmodernism. As such, to outline the matter by means of two notions theorised by Vattimo (1983, 2019),¹ punk music played by no means a marginal role in facilitating the rise of 'weak thought', destined to supplant 'strong thought'. Every doctrine or ideology that has claimed to provide, once and for all, principles upon which to found the future comes under attack, as it hinders the natural dynamism and evolution of history. In essence, truth becomes a rather relative factor, and every form of certainty — whether religious, political or social — assumes blurred contours, lacking that fixity which, in the past, enabled it to assume a paradigmatic role. Nevertheless, the desire — whether conscious or unconscious — to radically alter the course of history within a short span of time causes one to lose sight of the true dimensions of the phenomenon, which can engulf both the existence and the role of the individual and of the community. Driven by instinct and ambition, little care is taken to make use of reason, with the risk of becoming victims of the very innovative forces that have been set in motion.

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¹ The concept of 'weak thought' is also discussed by Rovatti and Vattimo (1983).

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