DIY Youth Groups in Saint Petersburg Russia

Abstract
This research considers the key actors and principles constituting the DIY scene in St. Petersburg. It traces the importance of independent music production, anti-commercialisation, anti-consumerism and creative self-realisation to the scene. It pays particular attention to the exploration of the diversity of young people involved in DIY scenes in the city and the evidence of differing narratives of DIY culture between musicians and activists within it.

Keywords: DIY, xenophobia, youth, subculture

Introduction
In a series of publications, Ol'ga Aksiutina (2005b) considers, “DIY-culture projects and DIY-cultures themselves … as free zones for everyday alternative life.” She argues that “DIY punk culture is not a mass culture; it does not use means of mass information to disseminate itself and does not seek to win a ‘mass’ audience but directly relates to punks and hard-core kids in small venues (not stadia). Punk resists the massive transnational companies preferring small independent labels, avoids buying in expensive supermarkets by accessing products via post or at concerts (via direct contact between bands and the audience), replaces glossy music magazines with self-produced fanzines and replaces music as a commodity with music as protest and self-expression, ignoring the media with its system of ‘hits’ and ‘charts”’ (Aksiutina, 2004). In a similar vein, Zaitseva (2004) argues that “every DIY enterprise is vulnerable but the lack of interest in profit continues to be reproduced as a result of the whole system of collective action which has a central position in the musical world in which DIY labels often become ‘laboratories’ of style and movements as well as starting points for groups onto a path to wider recognition. And despite frequent claims that ‘any music can become commercial’,
it is precisely the productive illusion of a ‘pure’ and non-profit-oriented musical process that ensures both artistic innovation and an alternative to the capitalist mode of production and consumption.” Without wishing to deny the roots of DIY culture in resistance, nonetheless, the material from St. Petersburg gathered under the auspices of the SAL project allows a more balanced insight into such scenes than hitherto captured in published literature. In particular the research allowed an exploration of the diversity of young people involved in DIY scenes in the city and thus also the discovery of differing narratives of DIY culture between musicians and activists within it.

Methods

One six-week period of fieldwork was conducted in Spring 2008. Access to the group was gained through existing contacts in St. Petersburg and contacts provided by scene members in other cities. Prior to the commencement of fieldwork, a survey of the media coverage and self-presentation of the groups (especially via Internet) was conducted. This also facilitated initial contacts – for example, in the case of the neo-Pagan case study – through chat forums. In all cases, snowballing was used to generate new respondents from contacts provided by key informants. The main methodological techniques employed for gathering data for these case studies were:

- web-site analysis
- ethnographic observation
- recorded interviews with respondents
- researcher diaries
- visual mappings of urban space used by the groups using still and video photography.

A total of 9 interviews and 1 fieldwork diary were analysed for this case study.

Results

Within the punk community, there is an image of “authentic” and “inauthentic” punks. “Inauthentic” punks include those associated with the 1980s and 1990s who are often referred to as “dirty punks” and seen as adopting only the external attributes of punk and realising the idea of protest through anti-social demonstrative behaviour, alcoholism etc. From around 2000, there appeared a new generation of punks who can be seen as more politicised and for whom external appearance is of relatively minor importance. They consider views and behaviour – the real protest against social injustice and capitalist values – to be the most important thing. This leads to conflict between punks of the old and new type:
Interviewer: Are there no conflicts between punks like you and those [who were around] before? …
Respondent: Well there are. … They make out that I, my friends – are not punks, but rather they are the real punks because they are dirty, drunk etc. And that we are like some show-off rich kids, as they see it. They are known as ‘decorative’ punks. … But even so, they are not punk. They don’t do anything. … They buy all kinds of things, go to shops where they sell Nazi paraphernalia and so on, all kinds of cheap T-shirts and so on and think they are punks, get drunk, and that’s it. (Punk musician, 22-year old)

At the same time, people sharing the same values and views and communicating on one wavelength can quickly find a common language. The practice of “signing in”, i.e., getting in to concerts free (by being on a list of invitees) or staying overnight at somebody’s, helps them travel and attend concerts. These principles of mutual support and assistance are a kind of social and economic resource ensuring the stability and viability of the punk community.

Important also is the use of informational resources about which only people incorporated into punk practice know. This is information about closed Internet portals, forums, specialised shops and trading points where it is possible to buy music and subcultural products and obtain information about actions (events, meetings, protests) and future concerts. Access to such resources saves time and money.

Group-society relations
The ideas of equality and non-discrimination in the sphere of culture, music and information are extrapolated by informants into an ideology of anti-discrimination action and views such as the protest against racism, xenophobia and homophobia and the protection of animals:

If you extend the idea of equality, then naturally, equality means opposition to all kinds of discrimination, oppression and so on. It is against prejudices related to race or nationality, against racism, homophobia and everything connected to it. The support of animal rights also, naturally, the equality of rights between people and animal, and the support of all liberationary discourses. (Punk, fanzine producer, 29-year old)

In some cases, this expresses itself in veganism, straight-edge culture, the organisation of participation in various actions such as the defence of human rights, environmental protection and anti-fascist and anti-globalisation (Food Not Bombs) actions when vegetarian food is distributed free of charge to the needy.

In the case study undertaken in this research, the ideas of the DIY-punk movement and the anti-fascist movement were closely interwoven since non-discrimination assumes an anti-fascist position. For this reason, some informants identified as anti-fascists participated in related protest and violent actions.
Attending DIY and hard core concerts and the use of DIY symbols places a certain responsibility on young people, since these signs can be interpreted by hostile Nazi-skinheads as a sign of anti-fascist views:

If they see some badge being worn by someone, they go, 'Aha, so you’re Anti-fa.' And that's it, they jump on you. They can kill you without blinking. They don't bother to find out what or who you are. The most dangerous thing is all these [cloth] DIY badges – I mean you might not be an anti-fascist at all but simply somebody who has bought a badge and worn it. I mean you just liked this group and you went to a hardcore concert. But you could get yourself killed just for that. They won't bother to find out. (Punk musician, 23-year old)

Views, beliefs and ideology

DIY stands for Do It Yourself and it is part of the ideology and practice of many youth cultures. It is one of the main principles within punk culture since it is linked to the idea of social protest against globalisation and mass culture. For example, there is a widespread practice of creating independent music labels and distribution companies and producing newspapers and specialised journals (fanzines). Of all the manifestations of punk DIY, the production of fanzines has become the most widespread in the post-Soviet space (especially at the end of the 1990s, beginning of the 21st century). To create a fanzine, one does not need a huge sum of money; instead of publishing a huge run, one original can be printed and then photocopied as orders come in. Usually fanzines are produced at the creator’s own expense and sold for cost-price. The average price of a fanzine is 50 roubles. There are also individuals who make and sell music-related and subcultural paraphernalia: T-shirts, cloth and metal badges and banners. But such DIY-products are produced not in millions but in tens or hundreds, which indicates the “non-mass” nature of this phenomenon.

The DIY “ethic” assumes that the income from the sale of punk or hardcore production is put towards the development of the local scene and not personal enrichment. Thus the money generated by cultural production, as a rule, goes towards production and distribution of labels; the money is used, for example, for the next releases. Punk production is distributed primarily through exchange. Exchanges take place between labels in different cities and countries. The main forms of distribution of punk artefacts are mail order or purchase at concerts. In both cases, this assumes not only consumption but also communication and moves relations between “buyer” and “seller” onto a personal level. At the same time, the notion that “you can't buy punk recordings at the nearest rock shop” creates an important sense of exclusivity about this production.

Apart from its consumption function, these practices also carry the meanings of protest within punk; representatives of the punk-DIY culture believe that the ability to do everything yourself, and thus bypass consumer society, has a subversive function.
Thus DIY-culture embodies the following qualities: independent production, independence, anti-commercialisation and anti-consumerism, creativity, self-realisation, the creation of one’s own culture, communication, enthusiasm, mutual support, joy of creativity, honesty and interest/engagement.

The main political ideas of the group are equality and non-discrimination, the recognition of freedom of expression and the rejection of hierarchy and control:

To my mind, punk is a youth – and now not even that youthful – culture based on ideas of equality. The idea is that, in relation to music for example, the boundary between the listener and those on stage is blurred. If three people are playing on the stage, then [when they finish] they come down into the room and listen to the next group. It’s the same with fanzines – there again the boundary between those who make [fanzines] and those who read them is erased; yeah, so that today you read a zine, tomorrow you make your own one. You see. And… that, in my opinion, is the punk idea. And when there are concerts, not in clubs, not in some… but in places like clubs or bars but independent, then often they organise them in sports halls or cafeterias – in places where there are no stages. And so the listeners and the musicians are all on the same level. That’s like, the punk idea, that’s an important part of what it’s all about. (Punk fanzine producer, 29-year old)

Many punks also share anarchist ideas and are members of political communities. A separate practice is squatting, that is the occupation of empty buildings in the city where life is constructed according to the principle of a commune.

**Intra-group relations**

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Conclusions

DIY-culture in Russia has been studied to date primarily through “insider” accounts of the movement. This material provides an interesting insight into the self-presentation of the movement as a form of resistance to the institutions of commercial music and culture. The research conducted here, in contrast, explores the engagement with the DIY scene by a broader range of individuals and groups and thus allows a more balanced insight into the solidarities – and ruptures – that govern the scene.

References


DIY jaunimo grupės Sankt Peterburge (Rusijoje)

Santrauka

Šio tyrimo autorės analizuojos pagrindinius Sankt Peterburgo DIY (angl. Do It Yourself) kultūros dalyvius ir jos veikimo principus. Akcentuojama jų veiklos sritims būdinga nepriklausomos muzikos gamybos svarba, antikomerciškumas, vartotojų teisių gynimas ir kūrybingas savęs realizavimas gyvenamojo vietoje. Apskaitinama jaunimo, įsitraukusių į miesto DIY kultūrą, veiklų įvairovė ir skirti šios kultūros naratyvai, kuriuos pateikia jos aktyvistai ir muzikantai. Judėjimo saviraiška mokslinėje literatūroje paprastai interpretuojama kaip rezistencijos prieš komercinęs muzikos ir kultūros institucijas forma. Šis tyrimas atskleidžia plataus jaunimo rato dalyvavimą DIY veiklose, todėl leidžia geriau suprasti jiems būdingą solidarumą ir iššūkius.

Tyrimas atliktas 2008 m., tęsesi 6 savaites, naudoti stebėjimų, 9 giluminių interviu, tyrimų dienoraščio, taip pat interneto svetainių duomenys.

Tyrėjos pateikia rekomendacijas institucijoms, atskleidžiančias tarpgrupinius miesto jaunimo ryšius, bendravimo su visuomene ypatumus, požiūrius, tikėjimus ir ideologiją.

Raktažodžiai: DIY, ksenofobija, jaunimas, subkultūra.