"Problems": Johnny and Donny's Iconoclastic Pop Populism

John Ike Sewell

In 1977, the Sex Pistols were *the* punk band. Sure, the New York protopunk contingent of bands led by Patti Smith and the Ramones had already made an indelible stamp on rock culture before the Sex Pistols were even a gleam in Svengali/provocateur Malcolm McClaren's eye. But the New York bunch were basically critics' darlings, elite bohemians who were lauded by New York's cognoscenti, deified by the hippest of the hip and otherwise pretty much ignored stateside. The Sex Pistols, in contrast, caused quite a stir. In England they were household names and debatably the nation's most popular band. And while they weren't exactly popular in the USA, they certainly were notorious, garnering headlines aplenty and TV news segments calculated to provoke a moral panic about the scourge of punk rock that, left unimpeded, was sure to indelibly taint the morals of America's guileless teens.

With any rock band, the vocalist is both spotlight stealer and sin eater. This is to say that the singer receives the bulk of the attention from the band's adoring fans—and, when and if controversy ensues, bears the brunt of public disdain. The Sex Pistols openly, unapologetically trafficked in controversy as a raison d'etre. So, trying to determine whether Johnny Rotten (nee John Lydon), the "singer," was valorized or villainized seems a linguistic conundrum at best. Likely it was some of both—a two-sided coin, as it were, of fame in infamy. Regardless, Rotten/Lydon's persona was and remains a bundle of contradictions. Worshipped and hated savior and destructor of rock n roll (and, later, punk), savant and buffoon,

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Rotten was, in the halcyon daze of first-wave punk, the personification of punk, a charismatic leader—both of his band and of a movement.

Granted, the Sex Pistols were more or less a "boy band," a group that was prefabricated to provoke maximum public outrage and, in the process, yield filthy lucre. Conceived, coached, clad, coiffed and (brothel) creepered by McClaren and his partner, fashion designer Vivien Westwood, the Pistols were tailor fitted to crash and burn in the public eye. Sure, McClaren had nicked a few ideas about music and attitude from the New York Dolls, who he had briefly managed prior, and the sartorial contraventions of Manhattan based anti-star, Richard Hell. But as (debatably) malleable teenagers with good cheekbones and lanky frames that were perfect for modeling Westwood's couture, the Pistols were something of an easier sell than the Dolls or Richard Hell. Why? Well, in the pop marketplace, younger $\dot{\omega}$ better. And, amidst a period of rampant unemployment and festering public malaise, Britain was just a more apt marketplace for such ribald, raunchy kind of stuff at the time.

Besides, the rock music scene was already ripe for reinvention. Groups were jettisoning the decadent musical indulgences of prog and arena rock for a simpler, stripped down, rough and ready sound identified as pub rock in Britain and as street rock in New York's CBGB scene. And there was a burgeoning backlash against the mellow, patchouli-scented peace and love ethos that was still permeating from what was left of the Woodstock generation. Propelled by the deft (mis)management of Malcolm McClaren as progenitors of punk, Rotten and the Sex Pistols became the public face of a movement that had been stirring in the underground, unnamed and uncrystallized. And it just so happened that the band was an exceptionally hard rocking combo, of its own volition. Thus, the Sex Pistols were seismically important.

Oddly enough, although the Sex Pistols claimed that they wanted to destroy rock n roll, what they were really doing was stripping rock music back down to its basic elements. With their basic riffs, snarling vocals and excessively bad attitude, the Pistols were a perverse strain of traditionalists who were reclaiming rock n roll from the "laid back," denim and suede hippies who had rendered it benign. This is the stuff that rebellious teenage dreams are made of. And no one's teenage dreams ever come true. And nothing is ever as straightforward as it seems.

This essay examines the polarization of opinions about the identity of Johnny "Rotten" Lydon as his public perception evolved from that of an anti-authoritarian agitator to a curmudgeonly right winger in the 40-plus years since the Sex Pistols' 1978 breakup, focusing in particular on Lydon's avowed support of populist movements, Brexit and MAGA (Sullivan, 2017), in the UK and US, respectively, and on the parallels between Rotten/Lydon and Donald Trump, both

of whose iconoclastic posturings worked to "burn it down"—for Rotten, the tired tropes of rock n roll and, for Trump, American politics. The essay introduces two novel concepts, iconoclastic pop populism and subcultural retro-valorization, to elucidate the vagaries and inherent (im)possibilities of identity, subculture and packaged rebellion.

Johnny and Donny

So, why in the world should we compare and contrast the lives and personae of a 1970s punk rocker with that of a post-millennial U.S. president? Considering the performative temperaments of both men, it's not such an incongruous twist of fate that the lives of Johnny "Rotten" Lydon¹ and former U.S. President Donald Trump have often been paralleled in news and popular culture reportage. After all, both are notoriously outspoken and difficult people.

That Lydon and Trump have both been identified as "punk" in various eras points to the evolving nature of the term, punk, as an empty signifier of an amorphous, perhaps ill-defined constituency. As Laclau (2005) explains, an empty signifier is a discursive construct, an identifying word or phrase (e.g. punk) that operates to unite once disparate parties as a sociocultural movement comes to the fore through its identification. Don't be fooled by the word "empty" in the idiom, "empty signifier." The quality of emptiness is what empowers the malleability of the empty signifier (Laclau, 2007, p. 35). In the rock n roll world of the late '70s, the empty signifier, punk, coalesced once incongruent constituencies such as pub rockers, teddy boys, glitter rockers, shock rockers, beatniks, queers and rebels into a singular entity, thus empowering its move from the shadows of the underground to the spotlight of mass popularity, in England, at least.

Whether or not both men are indeed punk, well, you decide. Interestingly, though, Trump and Rotten/Lydon share an abrasive self-presentational style that might indeed be classified as punk.

The list goes on. Trump and Rotten/Lydon have continually claimed to be "outside the system" and "of the people," all the while enmeshed in the system (For Johnny: major labels and the music industry. For Donny: the world of fi-

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¹ Of course, John Lydon is Johnny Rotten. Henceforth, I will use the last name, Rotten or Lydon, alternately, to denote its respective era. Rotten will be used when referring to time periods when the artist was with the Sex Pistols. Lydon will be used when referring to periods as a member of Public Image, Ltd., in private life and/or periods as a solo performer. I will use the conjoint surname, Rotten/Lydon, when referring to the singer in light of his entire performing career.

nance and the U.S. government) and all the while sitting atop the cultural slagheap as celebrities and—to varying degrees—men of wealth, power and influence. Both have claimed to be self-made men, telling their origin stories as variations of the bootstrap narrative—a self-mythology that is only based upon some semblance of truth for Lydon. Trump and Lydon both seem to fancy themselves as firebrands who operate recklessly with little regard for their, ahem, public images. And in their careers, both men have acquired not so inconsiderable amounts of cash from chaos.

Carnivalesque Inversion = Cash from Chaos?

Of course, no amount of semantic hair splitting will yield a provable, "scientific" conclusion about whether Johnny and Donny are or ever were "punk." No matter. We certainly *can* conclude, however, that both men have profited greatly as insurrectionists within their relative spheres of influence. Whenever and wherever these men appear, chaos is imminent. And both men are its profiteers. Rotten/Lydon's power comes in the form of (sub)cultural capital in the milieus of punk and post-punk, where musical and social conventions are rejected—or at least misshapen. Trump wields very real power in the milieus of finance and (especially) politics. For both men, power is achieved when conventions are destroyed—or at least turned "topsy turvy."

Both the punk/post-punk era and Trump's reign as U.S. president might be termed carnivalesque inversions, periods when "we find here a characteristic logic, the logic of the 'inside out,' of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 11). In both periods, antecedent norms were jettisoned in favor of new sets of contrarian norms, or "antinorms," as it were. In both cases, previously unacceptable outlooks, understandings and behaviors became *de rigueur*.

Paradoxically, these actions and expressions that appeared transgressive were not always so. Such acts of transgression, when performed during periods of carnivalesque inversion, provide the means for an easing of tensions which in turn operate to maintain the stability of the existing order (Bakhtin, P. 6). Stallybrass & White (1988) concur, stating that the temporary liberations offered in carnivalesque inversions provide "a form of social control of the low by the high" that best serves the interests of those in control to maintain that control (P. 13)

Both the punk/post-punk subcultures and the Trump administration certainly share properties with the carnivalesque inversions of the Middle Ages explained by Bakhtin in his analysis of Rabelais' literary work. Johnny and Donny

are both inceptors and exploiters of the spheres of chaos they've engendered. Punk/post-punk operated as a subculture from within the greater sphere of rock n roll culture which celebrated the carnal and grotesque, made sacred the profane, and elevated the pariah (Johnny) to topmost status, at least figuratively. And Donny, with his flouting of standard decorum, anything-goes extemporaneity and politics of revenge, literally elevated the pariah (in this case, himself) to topmost status as President of the United States.

Iconoclastic Pop Populism

Johnny and Donny, like most public figures (and, like everyone else), deliver a performed version of the self to their peers and publics. These performances of the self have proven to be modes of empowerment at their onset and, subsequently, an onus for both men. Obviously, when Lydon was Rotten, he was taking on a prefab persona that was either foisted upon him by McClaren, self-made, or perhaps a mixture of both—even if said persona was no more than an amplification of the preexisting, "true" self that lurked within. Likewise, Trump deftly built a persona of himself as a renegade wheeler dealer of high finance. Sure, Trump came from a wealthy family; and he was already rich as he rose to celebrity status in the 1980s. But was he as rich as he portrayed himself to be? And were these riches amassed as the result of artful deals? Not so much. With multiple bankruptcies to his credit and a litany of unpaid debts, Trump's deals were shady, at best. He wasn't a real estate baron, well, not exactly, but he played one on TV. What Trump was (and is) really selling is more a brand than buildings and land.

With this performativity of the self, Johnny and Donny display what is defined in this essay as *iconoclastic pop populism*: They are *iconoclastic* via their nihilistic personae and because they claim to be anti-institutional—both from within the systems they decry and purport to oppose; they are *pop* because, well, they're popular, they're pop culture icons, they more or less "play" themselves in mass media; and they're *populists* because they both claim to be "of the people." An avowed Tory who frequently bashes the "left wing media," Lydon, who holds American, Irish and UK citizenship and presently lives in Malibu, California, is a vocal supporter of Brexit and MAGA who claims similarities with Trump, even stating that the two, if introduced, might become fast friends (McCaffee, 2017, p. 1). And Trump, well, pardon my tautologism, but he's himself; a not-so-subtle demagogue and authoritarian populist who, incidentally, was elected president by the people and is now once again a presidential candidate and aspiring dictator.

The Cruel Optimism of Iconoclastic Pop Populism

But then again, "success" is never quite so simple, is it? What happens when the iconoclast becomes an icon? For Johnny and Donny, iconoclastic pop populism has been both an enabler of success and, in the present, perceived by many as either a tired pose, a curmudgeonly stance or both.

Whenever we want something, we forge a cognitive connection with it. We aspire to jobs, knowledge, status, relationships, material goods, anything that denotes an exchange of power (i.e. money) and access to cultural and political capital. Berlant (2011) asserts that, "When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make possible to us and to make possible for us" (p.23).

Getting what one wants entails more than a simple quid pro quo. We don't attempt to do or attain things if we feel utterly disempowered. To desire and/or aspire requires some sense of optimism. Desire and aspiration entail a series of obligational entanglements. To get what we want, we take on guises. And, in the process, we forge attachments not only to the object of desire, but also to the persona we take on in the process of acquisition.

Attachment to an object of desire provides a way to define ourselves. When John Lydon wanted fame, money, and artistic credibility he became Johnny Rotten. And when Donald John Trump, son of a New York realtor, wanted riches, celebrity status and, eventually, political power, he became "The Don," Donald Trump, power broker, magnate, artist of The Deal.

In their respective rises to fame and fortune, Johnny and Donny didn't just want to acquire things—they wanted status. So, for both men, the object of desire became the prefab persona. For Lydon, actually becoming Johnny Rotten was worth more than the fame and money that came as a result of donning the "Johnny Rotten" guise. For Trump, it was more of a "fake it till you make it" kind of deal: He wasn't really a power broker, magnate and artist of The Deal. But he acted like one for long enough to convince many that he was in fact that. Thus, he became, aargh, "himself."

Berlant defines this entanglement of acquisition and accompanying entailment as "cruel optimism," "the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object of desire" (p. 24). Maintaining an assumed persona cum "self" has, for both men, yielded what Berlant terms "the attrition or wearing down of the subject" (p. 28). Even though he no longer uses the sobriquet, "Johnny Rotten," Lydon is still thought to be a rotten rotter. And Trump, well, he's still himself—whichever surly, scheming Scrooge he might choose to be on the given day when it best suits his purposes.

Still, both Lydon and Trump continue to maintain desperate fealty to their respective personae. And the shelf life of these personae, both cultural products, is expiring—or perhaps already expired. Holding nowhere near the (sub)cultural cachet he once had, Lydon is thought at best to be something of a punchline, his assumed persona rendered cliché. And Trump is no longer President of the United States—at least for now.

Problems: Getting Rid of the Albatross

There certainly *are* a lot of similarities between Johnny and Donny, aren't there? But their comparison and contrast is merely a critical/analytical framework, a yin and yang that in its way cancels itself out. In the plus column, we've got the comparisons. And in the minus column, the contrasts. A minus Z equals zero, or something.

But here's where the contrast (Z) negates the comparison (A). Despite the many similarities brilliantly established in this essay, the end result of this comparative figure might be pretty vacant indeed. In the aggregate, Johnny *qua* Donny yields nada.

Lydon/Rotten, like Trump, is an iconoclastic pop populist who has reaped cash from chaos via an assumed persona, maximizing his cultural capital during a period of carnivalesque inversion. He maddened the minds and quickened the hearts of his audiences. But Johnny's chaos and inversion occurred for a limited span of years (roughly 1976-1983) only in the realm of the cultural. Donny, on the other hand, as transparently p(r)etty and vacant as his assumed persona is or may have been, nevertheless trafficked in roleplay that yielded tangible, material results in the lived world. Johnny's performative catharses changed our ways of seeing ourselves and the world, whereas Donny's performative catharses were catharses indeed. Case in point, the U.S. Capital siege of January 6, 2021 was anarchy in the USA—a very public flogging of the dying horse of American democracy, as it were.

So, as productive, fun and funny as it was to contrast Johnny and Donny, for the purposes of this essay, it'd probably be a better idea, at this point, to jettison this analytical scheme and reduce our comparative freight load by one passenger: Donny. Although the comparison and contrast of Johnny and Donny has well served its purpose to show the (im)possibilities of packaged rebellion, I concede that the purpose of including Trump in this analysis was to explicate the plasticity and inherent contradiction that leads to the inevitable breakdown of any prefab rebel persona, in this case, that of Johnny Rotten. To survive, as Johnny has, we may become who we once claimed to despise.

Then again, did Johnny *become* what he claimed to despise—or was he *always* that way? And if the "real" Johnny was and is pretty vacant, well, why should we even care?

Johnny's (sub)cultural capital peaked in the early 80s when he was regarded in the world of underground rock as an iconoclast's iconoclast. He first became an iconoclast as a Sex Pistol, by rejecting the norms of rock n roll and, in the process, briefly becoming a figurehead for emergent punk subculture. After the Sex Pistols self-destructed, Johnny became an iconoclast yet again by rejecting punk style and subculture to form the antithetical Public Image Ltd. By rejecting punk, Johnny in a way doubled down and became even *more punk*. This doubling down, for a time, rendered influence and subcultural cachet.

But Johnny's adversative proclivities soon wore themselves out yet again. And by the mid-80s, PiL was reduced to something of a Lydon solo project, abetted by session players delivering slickly produced alternative rock that is since all but forgotten. Johnny's golden era came and went in less than a decade. And since then, he's become something of a punchline at best, an extinguished firebrand who can't or won't shut up, despite himself. And this is a problem indeed for those of us who once held him in high regard. How can we argue the credibility and power of his expression—all the while knowing who he's become, or always was? Knowing what we know about the political proclivities of the "real" Johnny, is it still OK to love the Sex Pistols?

"Anger is an Energy"

For Marcuse (1977), transgressive art, even that which claims to be apolitical, is inherently political. Transgressive art is a site of rupture, providing its consumers with a punctum/portal through which to envision new schemes of aestheticism and, more importantly, new ways of being. Liberation, or at least liberatory potential, occurs through art when the work transcends its social determination and the given discourse of its context. Marcuse asserts that the art form "requires that even the representation of death and destruction invoke the need for hope—a need rooted in the new consciousness embodied in the work of art (p. 7). So, a Jackson Pollock painting or a poem by TS Eliot, or even a song by the Sex Pistols might spur its viewer/reader/listener into new ways of understanding artistic expression and a new spectrum of ontological possibilities.

Let's face it, The Sex Pistols were a prefab band designed to provoke public outrage from their inception. Granted, the members of the Sex Pistols were an angry and rebellious lot before they were a band. But it was manager Malcolm McClaren who saw fit to focus on the angry, rebellious tendencies as a selling

point. Without McClaren's dexterous manipulations, it's unlikely the band would have garnered much attention at all, let alone become the focal point for a burgeoning musical movement. McClaren came to the band with a preformed strategy to maximize its outrageous portrayals in mass media and then capitalize upon that momentum before the whole thing went up in flames (Savage, 1992, pp. 204-207). Sure, the band played incredibly rocking music. But that was just a happy accident. McClaren, a self-appointed Svengali, really just wanted the band to be foul-mouthed yobs. And it just so turns out that the Pistols' unaffected, foul-mouthed yobbishness exceeded McClaren's wildest imaginations, and then some.

Admit it: when you're a teenager (and perhaps when you're an adult as well), nihilism for nihilism's sake can be fun. Having some kind of high-minded, noble rationale for wanton recklessness is not a requirement. In fact, it's an impediment. Revolution For The Hell of It is what it's all about. It's rational to have a rationale. And rationalism is not very sexy. And who wants to be unsexy?

Johnny Rotten may not have turned out to be the savior/anarchist we always wanted him to be, but so what? Life sucks, then you die. Or you soldier on, expectations and ideals diminishing with each passing day.

Indeed, it's OK to love the Sex Pistols, even if we don't still love John Lydon and even when we disagree with almost everything he stands for these days. This doesn't justify anything, really, but as a culture, we've made a habit of forgiving loutish behaviors from artists whose work we love, for whatever reason. And isn't the realm of art supposed to be an amoral space, anyway? And, furthermore, what is the unit of assessment when we make judgments about the artistry of a given cultural product? Are we assessing the artist, or are we assessing the work as an entity unto itself? My vote's for the latter.

Transgressive Retrovalorization

We may have been hellraisers in our youths who enjoyed hellraising art, and why should we make excuses for that? Still, there is never a shortage of aesthetes, dilettantes, windbags and wankers, all scrambling to wrest some kind of noble rationale from the artistic transgressions of the past.

We still love amoral/immoral (sub)cultural products whose lingering negativity nevertheless troubles us. So, we think of a high-minded way to rationalize our attraction to it in retrospect. We loved the Sex Pistols because they were wild and fun and, well, just *wrong*. The band was a thorn in the side of "family entertainment," a stick in the eye of what then counted as musical validity, and a slap in the face of the "peace and love" ethos that was part and parcel of 60s and 70s

rock n roll subculture. Isn't the transgressive quality of the Sex Pistols justification enough? Apparently not.

So, what do we do? We perform a kind of ex post facto sleight of hand that I'll term transgressive retrovalorization. Through the process of transgressive retrovalorization, we repaint Rotten as a sanctimonious seer, not just a foul-mouthed yob. Transgressive retrovalorization is more than just the retroactive remix and whitewashing of heretofore troubling aspects of past histories and expressions. Through transgressive retrovalorization, we not only render a version of our past that is not only made saccharine, but that is also stripped of the provocations that made it important in the first place. If our past lives and expressions had really been as benign and our motivations as noble as we portray them to be through the lens of retrovalorization, they wouldn't have proven as fertile eras for artistic sublimation. As per Bakhtin, the quality of transgression in a work of art is what enables its provocation and appeal. So, to recast the Sex Pistols as "nice boys" or even "noble savages" is something of a fool's errand that declaws the band and its music, nullifying its transgressive and transformative powers in the process. If the Sex Pistols had been more like the Bay City Rollers, well, they would have only sparked our imaginations about as much as the Bay City Rollers did.

Johnny, I Hardly Knew Ye: Death of the Author and Bodies Then and Now

My passionate yearning for a Johnny that is no more, or perhaps never was, is probably a symptom of my own idealism (or naivete, even) gone awry. When I found the Sex Pistols, or when they found me, in 1977, I was a 13-year-old idiot, still in the thrall of stadium rockers like KISS and Aerosmith and still secure in the belief that, like, rock n roll would never die, dude. I was disgusted and repelled by them, intuiting that they were indeed a real threat. But I couldn't get them out of my head. Reading and rereading their coverage in rock n roll magazines and newspapers, I was mind blown that it was possible for anyone to even be like that. Were they for real?

So, I decided I'd actually listen to their music. And when I listened, they rocked me, bard. My revulsion for the band soon evolved into obsession. And then, finally, shaken to my core in a moment of true catharsis, I was transfigured by them. Somehow, a switch was thrown. This really was aesthetic sublimation. I realized that the "no future" foretold by the Sex Pistols was indeed the future of rock and, indeed, my future.

All of this is to say that Johnny Rotten, as I imagined him to be, was a hero and savior. Was he worthy of my canonization? Was he really the voice of a generation? Was he philosophically strong enough to bear the moral onus of his own

iconoclasm? The answer to all these questions, of course, is no. But it would be ridiculous to have expected anything like that from him, as I once did. Of course, I got over it soon enough. Nonetheless, I remain quite a bit disappointed by Johnny's populist worldview and his in-public flirtation with that *other* oddly coiffed blowhard, Donald Trump.

Lydon is and probably always has been a lot more like Trump than the anarchist we imagined/projected him to be. Regardless of what his ideology was/is, though, it's impossible for anyone with even an iota of aesthetic sense to deny that his delivery was passionate, of the moment, coming from a place of utter conviction and wrought in a furnace of white hot, adolescent rage that is imminently relatable. For these reasons, Rotten's legacy, the music and, even more importantly, the punk movement he helped to create, is important—much more so than the prefab persona (Johnny Rotten) or the actual person (John Lydon) who created/embodied it.

Sure, history and context are important, to a degree. But one's aesthetic appreciation (or lack thereof) of any given artistic work is driven by that individual's perception. However we ourselves choose to interpret an artistic work is for us to decide on our own–individually. When we hear a song or see a performance or work of visual art, what matters most is its immediate emotional impact–shorn of context and *in the moment of reception*. As such, the authorial intention of the creator of the work, in this case, Johnny's, is not nearly as important as the way it makes us *feel* when we hear it.

More portal than pop tone, the Sex Pistols' music rings timeless and transcendent. The voice on the recordings *still* convinces me. When Johnny, whoever he was, sang his songs, "he meant it, man."

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