I have a problem with underground culture and radical politics. Both are part of my life. Both shaped who I am and how I see the world. Both have disappointed me.

The Left or the US is a joke. Unfortunately the world is not. The end of the Cold War and the collapse of totalitarian states hasn’t led to peace, prosperity, and freedom, but have exploded instead into ethnic and religious barbarism, or, as evidenced by negotiations for a partnership between right-wing capitalist Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation and the communist China People’s Daily, threaten to solidify into previously unimaginable combinations of corporate and political control. On the domestic front, the logic of the market reign supreme in spheres from entertainment to education to the environment, while the traditional mediator of the state, has buried itself with fastening the redistribution of wealth from the many to the few, and has turned its attention toward policing disrepair and the poor. Since the beginning of the 1970s, hope in the USA at least, progressive ideals have been in retreat and Left organizations are in shambles. The vibrant social movements of those of the Right.

During the same period, however, my beloved underground - or alternative - culture has grown impressively. The Scene - its values, its critiques, its sites - has spread across the country, finding a receptive place in the hearts and minds of alienated young people. Even its very co-optation is testament to its popularity. But creating an alternative underground world - no matter how novel and supportive it is - and putting out a “radical” line - no matter how irreverent, expressive, and fun - seem incomplete, and woefully inadequate, responses in the face of all this disaster. There has to be something more.
Progressive politicians need new imagination and new organization to replace the exhausted causes of the 1960s. Culture is a space where radically different ways of seeing, thinking, and being can be experimented with and developed. Zines are one mean for creating this space. But without a connection between cultural imagination and political implementation this means little. If underground culture is to have any political importance — and any significance for me — it must make this leap.

But besides my personal convictions, there is another, and more important, reason to be concerned with the politics of zines. They ask for a questioning mechanim, reconceiving capitalism, exhaling others to do the same, spreading the ideal of an authentic life, the vast majority of which are critical of mainstream society and mass culture, and at least hint that there might be a different way. To interrogate underground culture is to do possible political impact is merely taking one of their sides.

To those who object to a political investigation of zines on the grounds that it's not culture, I argue back that culture is never just culture — and this is doubly true for an alternative medium such as zines. Culture: artistic creation, is an expression of culture: tradition and lived experience. Both the culture that people enjoy and the culture in which they are embedded provide them with ideas about how things are and how they should be, or, more accurately, with frameworks through which to interpret reality and possibility. Culture helps us account for the past, make sense of the present, and imagine the future. This is why it is so deeply political.

Yet unlike a political treatise or a demagogic speech, the politics of culture never announce themselves as political. As we live our lives and take pleasure in our entertainment, the politics expressed within and through culture become part of us, get under our skin, and become part of our "common sense." This is what gives the politics of culture their power. And while the cards are stacked in favor of those who control the means of mental and material production to create and disseminate cultural values and creations that flow from and reflect their experience and their interests, those without power also have the capability to create a culture — one that arises out of their way of understanding the world. Thus, culture plays an important function in forming and solidifying the reality of the dominant or hegemonic power in society or, conversely, in acting as a language and space enabling subjugated groups to challenge that rule.

I am particularly interested in this latter role, in what Antonio Gramsci called counterhegemonic culture: a culture arising out of dissent and providing a countervision of society. Zines and the underground manifest such
a vision. In reaction against the dominant culture, and drawing upon residual models of participatory culture, zinesters have produced their own alternative meaning systems and representations. This countercultural movement — like all others — is shot through with contradictions, but within it lies the potential for political resistance.3

This emphasis on "potential" is crucial, for it is quite popular in academia these days to point to any cultural manifestation — in no matter how marginal a way — as evidence of countercultural activity and leave it at that, expecting the Revolution somehow to follow.4 Often using Graziani's name to support their own arguments, these scholars rarely acknowledge his other provocation. Graziani was a brilliant sociologist, but first and foremost he was a revolutionary, a leader of the first Italian Communist Party.6 While he believed that countercultural activity was essential, and that an attack on capitalist culture must accompany it, he insisted that the project of changing the material relations of society was not enough for Graziani. Changes in culture and consciousness had to be linked to political programs and political organization, and result in real changes in the physical structure of the economic system.7

A number of years back, the historian Eric Hobsbawm made the useful distinction between political and pre-political movements. Political movements have the organisation, ideology, and will to effect political change. Pre-political movements — such as the bands and religious fanatics Hobsbawm studied — are made up of "people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, a specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world" 8 — but they are groups which have revolutionary potential.9 They also have something that more formal, "political," groups can sometimes lack: a close connection to lived experience. Zines and underground culture are decidedly pre-political. The important question at this point is what leads them toward or away from political engagement.

A NONCHALANT REVOLUTION OF SortS

Zines and underground culture constitute a free space where people can experiment with possibility. As Thornton Kines writes regarding the sites laid out in Aesthetic Envy, "Everything reviewed is a new patent, a new city, a new neighborhood. In short, a direct challenge to anyone who loves to explore, discover, share thoughts and experiences — and peep through windows. 10 Reading each zine is delving into the author's
idiosyncratic world, and taken as a whole the underground culture taps out an unfamiliar and multi-faceted universe. Knowing it you identify pos-
sibility, undertaking the most powerful hegemonic tool that the power-
ful have at their disposal: the justification of the current order as "natural."

Considering zines’ influence from science fiction, the fact that readers
and writers use them to imagine and explore different worlds is not
surprising. Science fiction has always allowed an imaginative place in which
to construct utopian visions of what might be or dystopian warnings of
what could be. The gap between fiction of SF fantasy and imagining real
political change can be slight. Science fiction has attracted political writers
such as the socialist H.G. Wells and the libertarian Robert Heinlein.
And the Futurians, an early fan club which spawned many famous SF
authors and editors, shared its first meeting space — and a number of its
members — with the Farbush Young Communist League, publishing its
first fanzine on the mimeograph machine used to put out the Young
Communist Flatbush YC Yol. What zines and underground culture with
large offer is a safe place in which to test out new ideas and to imagine
a different way of ordering things.

Scott Cunningham, one of the editors of the deepy political comic
World War III, once told me a curious story. We were discussing the
political function of zines when all of a sudden he began talking to me
about growing up as a kid and reading Superman comics. There was a
problem with Superman, Scott explained. He was just too wholesome
and too powerful. He’d never marry or have an emotional life, and he’d
never be in any real physical danger. This left Superman’s writers and
readers in a bind, as there wasn’t much they could do with a hero like
this. So the comic book writers came up with something called “Imagi-
ary Tales,” stories in which, as Scott describes them, “It was like: What
if Superman married Lois Lane? What if Superman was in an accident
and lost half of his powers? It gave them a chance.”

At the time I remember being sort of annoyed with Scott for going
off the subject, but I later realized he hadn’t strayed at all, he was talking
about the political functions of zines. Zines are “Imaginary Tales” that
allow their writers and readers to step from the controlling bounds of
what is and imagine what if? Like Superman’s powers, the dominant society
is totalizing; zines offer a way to get outside of it by imagining an alter-
nate universe — they give their writers and readers “a chance.”

In some cases this aim is explicit: Designing New Civilizations is an APA
through which the participants are “designing” new civilizations — socie-
ties that are many more times more intelligently, enlightened, loving and
peaceful than the present civilization." But more often these imaginary worlds are implicit, experimenting with new identities, political vocabularies, and emotions that are not readily accepted in the dominant society.

There is still political potential in these imaginary worlds. Such potential was harnessed by the fascist National Front in England, which recruited young skinheads in the late 1970s and produced a zeitgeist exposing their views. But the political possibilities of subcultures were also recognized by members of the British left-wing Socialist Workers Party. Reacting to racist attacks and the growing popularity of the NF among young whites, the SWP staged a series of successful Rock Against Racism concerts linking black mates with white punks, while producing its own zine: "Templar Handing." To the late David Widgery, one of RAB's main organizers, the imaginary world produced within a cultural setting was powerful politics. At an RAB concert, he wrote, people "saw something else, a glimpse of a different sort of society, a moment of inspiration that will last a lifetime. For a while we managed to create in our noisy, messy, unconventional way an emotional alternative." The fact that this alternative was noisy, messy, unconventional, and emotional is important, for it was a sign that politics was speaking the language of its constituents. The power of the imaginary worlds of underground culture comes from their organic roots, as it is a culture produced by people, not merely for people. This is what makes it hot property for marketers who understand the value of veracity, and it's something that politicians could stand to learn as well. "If socialism," Widgery continued, "is transmitted in a deliberately slick, pre-electronic idiom, if its emotional appeal is to working-class accretion and middle-class glee, and if its dominant medium is the ill-printed word and the drab public procession, it will simply bounce off people." In order for radical analysis or a utopian imagination to stick to people, it must speak in the tongue of people's experiences, not in the priest's Latin, of academics or the jargon of sectarianism. Zines at their best do this, articulating a radical imagination in an almost ill-printed vernacular—but they do something else as well for the world of zines is not entirely imaginary—it is built, and in the burning of this culture policy of language are learned. Initially inspired by the mainstream culture, zine writers have created vast networks of independent communication in order to share the ideas and thoughts they feel are not being expressed elsewhere. These networks make up a distinct material infrastructure of communication that uses the technology of mass commercial society—computers, copy machines, mail systems—but inverts the use of these.
The Politics of Alternative Culture

Technologies toward nonprofit, communal ends. The network also lends itself as a model of social organization. One of the questions the anarchists is to reappropriate as a philosophy to the underground world is that it is a close extraction of the network: voluntary, nonhierarchical, with one-directional communication flows, and each citizen a creator, consumer.

Within such a self-organized network the political lesson is one of doing-it-yourself, a refusal to be passive. "In closing," writes Joseph Gessen in NO LONGER A FANzine, "let me encourage all of you, whether you like this 'zine or not, to do your own. Design a 'zine, putting on a show, playing in a band, and just saying what you think is a radical act in itself these days." "A publication like this," begins the poetry trio Short Fuse, "using commonly available tools, is within your grasp to make. Don't seek to be legitimated by corporate capitalism, academia, or any other authoritarian system." Antonio Gramsci once argued that "All men are intellectuals ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals"; zines and underground culture provide the medium for all people to be intellectuals - cultural creators - and this itself is a radical act. It's radical because the first politics, as Mike Gunderloy enjoined, must always be of that people "getting" off their butts and doing something.

Yet in some ways the ideal of do-it-yourself is a far-from-radical proposition. The idea of not allowing your creativity to be seized by any "authoritarian" system is the essence of American individualism. The far-from-disdained business section of the New York Times recently ran a piece entitled "The Do-It-Yourself Employer," with profiles on "DIY" accountants, real estate brokers, and public relations agents. The reporter concludes, correctly, that "being one's own boss" is part of the American Dream. Zine creators, as primarily the sons and daughters of the American middle class, are trained to be individuals, schooled in the ideology of self-sufficiency. They enter the world prepared to make their mark on the world. However, the contemporary United States is a far different place from the mythic land of independent women that Thomas Jefferson once imagined. Most American work for someone else, or if they are "lucky" they employ others and become a dependent cog in a larger system, in either case showing up the American Dream to be just that a dream.

Zines offer a way for those trained in the ideology of the American dream of individual creativity to act upon it. But the context in which this individualism is expressed - an underground network set in opposition to the dominant society - ensures that the zine is not of the "rock
you jack, I got mine" school of thought that if it is not acausal or driven by possessive individualism. In the mass world, doing-it-yourself is redefined help-
ing others to do-it-themselves — if for no other reason than you have someone to trade your wine with. The critic is that competitive indi-
vidualism is replaced by an idea of cooperative individualism:

Because the cultural world of mass is built in explicit opposition to the mainline, doing-it-yourself often can be a project that is not merely a concept set against the status quo. To "Question Authority. That's why I publish," writes Chris O'Brien of Madusa Confusion. And just sitting down to do your wine, Masson's Dan Werle says, is

a means of me giving the hims to the television, giving the bird to others that are interested in controlling me... For at least a month or that quantify-five to twenty hours I put into each issue of the wine, that's my time and this is my way of making a revolution of sorts. It is silly and it sounds.

It does sound a bit silly, calling an hour or an evening putting together a rime "revolutionary." (unhappily or not) But the step one takes in creating an adversarial culture is one closer to the step toward political involvement.

Our on a late-night shift on New York's Times Square with Street Watch, a watchdog group that monitors police treatment of the homeless, I turned to my new partner and asked him how he got involved in all this, "Listen-
ting to the Clash." Roy SanFilippo master-of-fact explained. Grow-
ing up in Orlando, FL, and feeling like an outcast, Roy had gotten into the local punk rock scene. Once part of this scene, he began thinking about the words to the music he was listening to, lyrics such as the Clash's "I'm So Bored with the USA." This, Roy says, got him wondering about what he wasn't learning in school and led him to Howard Zinn's People's History of the United States. From there Roy started working in a local branch of the People's Action International, then later in the more radical El Salvadorean solidarity group CISPES. Today, he is an anarchist activist and part of the collective that runs Blackout Books, a radical book and wine store in New York City. Roy, Roy the progression from cultural rebellion to political action was natural, as "punk prepared me to be a political outcast, since I was already a social one." 1

The "deeping stone" theory is a mainstay of the study of deviance. As sociologist Howard Becker argues, deviant individuals travel through stages of escalating involvement in what he calls a "deviant career."

In the case of drug abuse, a person begins with legally sanctioned drugs such as tobacco and alcohol, moves to soft drugs like marijuana, then on to the
harder stuff cocaine and heroin. For most sociologists (though not Becker) deviance is something to be avoided, a virus to be controlled, the tacit assumption being that society is healthy and deviance is evidence of maladjustment. But if one believes that society is ill, then a deviant career is something to be celebrated and its stages cultivated. Politicians are not born, they are made. People become political through a socialization process. As Roy's case illustrates, there is such a thing as a deviant political career and underground culture can be a stage in it.23

First and foremost, zines are a tool for consciousness raising. Riot Grrrl zines, for example, provide the means for young women to share their experiences of living in a sexist society and through the exchange to learn that they are not alone. In this process they become in their experience, transforming it from the difficulties of an individual to a social and political problem; a necessary step in any politicization process. Through these zines they also learn that women can do and have done things. Lists of women's groups and books appear frequently in the pages of Riot Grrrl, and the zines themselves are evidence that a woman's place is not as a receiver but as a creator. Last, the Riot Grrrl network offers a point of communication and solidarity. Riot Grrrl's zines and music shows are used as a collective forum to define the very nature, history and identity of their community ... and of their enemies: patriarchal society, the mass media, and so on.

But zines also function to raise the consciousness of individuals who do not belong to any set group. Reading the range of opinions and lifestyles, the probing search for authenticity, and the depth of the rage against society in zines encourages readers to think about who they are and what they believe in. Such testimony from regular people -- fellow losers -- can also lend them the courage to stand up and profess their own opinions, and then, perhaps, to act upon them. In a poignant moment in our conversation, Dan Weiler, the nonchalance revolutionary of Manumaticum, told me why he started writing and where it has taken him:

The sad reality of it is that I'm still trying to get over a lot of my upbringing. I didn't have a crazy, messed up upbringing, just very conservative. I grew up in the affluent suburbs ... in a very conservative town. And I'm still trying to get it through my skull that activism is okay. That's not a bad thing. This is not of my little step forward in that direction... It's very sad to think that it really took me a long time to sit down and get myself together to do this because I was so scared of coming forth and offering my voice ... to actually come out and say something and have to defend my words or support my arguments.
But this is hopefully going to be a means toward a greater end, as well as an end in itself... I hope to use the fanzine as a step toward compelling me into a larger arena... to read something about Peru because I want to write about it and then become active in changing US policy toward Peru, or helping Peruvians, or becoming an AIDS activist. I'd love to have the gain to become an AIDS activist, and I think that this is sort of my little step to say: "Yes, I can do it." The last I heard from Dan was a postcard. He had moved to Kentucky to enter nursing school and become an AIDS nurse.

Dan isn't the only one to make a political move up through the underground world of zines. Distressed by the dearth of critical information about US involvement and interests in the Middle East during the Gulf War, Gregg Ruggiero and Stu Suhulkia used their experience publishing their zine, Open Magazine, to print and distribute a lecture by Noam Chomsky on "US Gulf Policy." This was the start of an excellent series of pamphlets on political events and issues including abortion rights, NAFTA and GATT, propaganda and the mass media, and the rebellion in southern Mexico, spreading the words of radical scholars as well as such revolutionaries as Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas.

Another "career" is that of ex-maximumwolff columnist Jane Guskas, who went on from her zine-writing days to work in Nicaragua (and write about it in MRR), help organize the alternative cultural space ABC No Rio, run a food co-op in New York City, put out a weekly news update on Latin America, and produce Time to Organize, a zine "to encourage people to organize." Would these people have been politicized even without the stepping stone of zines and underground culture? Maybe, maybe not. While it's possible to note who has used zines as a springboard, it's pure conjecture to try to determine who would have followed the same trajectory even without them. But since zine culture emphasizes action ("It's useless to complain about the oppressive nature of Mass Culture unless you are actively trying to create an Alternative Culture," writes Mind Theatrical's Glenn Grant), it's common to see zine writers doing things and exploring new avenues.

"That's what it's about now: figuring out what other things can be done," Christine Boarn argues. "We've got the records, we've got the fanzines... so now what's the next thing?" Once having their consciousness raised and their confidence bolstered within the world of underground culture, the step out to engage with issues on a grander political plane is smaller than before.

I know this well because my own politicization came through immersion in a subculture. Like Roy, it was in a local punk rock scene that...
I found the idea, the medium, and the support to take the inarticulate rage I felt at society's injustices and emptiness, and give it a name, a shape, and a voice. It was through this subculture that I connected with a tradition of dissent; a tradition that spoke a language I could understand and that made sense to me being who I was and where I was.

But I also hung out in this scene long enough to know its limitations and contradictions. One of the members of the first punk band I was in turned his rebellion against the hypocrisy of the status quo into a flirtation with fascism, and eventually became a small-town cop. Consider this from a fascist zine called *Third Way*, the "Voice of the Rising Generation":

The goal of Third Way is 1) to create an independent media for White nationalistically; 2) to educate young Whites through a counterculture which is opposed to the sick society of the present system; and 3) to allow young nationalists a chance to "let off steam" to voice their opinions and feelings openly in a sympathetic environment... What sets us apart, as Revolutionary Nationalists... is that we are a cultural as well as a political movement."

The inchoate rage of radical culture can work as a stepping stone to the Right as well as the Left.

And often the underground is not a stepping stone at all but an island - a permanent home for some, a weekend vacation spot for others - where you can escape from the real world. The other member of my first band sequestered his rebellion to the world of culture, and in his "other life" worked for the system, later training for a career in the US State Department. For as much as there are facets of underground culture that move individuals towards political engagement in the larger world, there are equal forces that move them away.

HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD

"This zine is our way of saying fuck off to all the people who shut on the good things in life..." begins *burning America*. Zines, as part of an adversarial subculture, face a political obstacle: Politics require satisfactory glaziness, and a vision, what while unifies the underground is a section of what is. In their zine, Dan and Chris go on to list who they want to say "fuck off to":

All the worthless, annoying neo-nazis & everything they stand for. All the macho sadists that abuse & degrade women & people in general. The pro-life, the fucking politicians & policemen. The insecure, sexually confused homophobic
Clear about who and what they don't like, the editors of *burning America* are considerably more hairy when it comes to explaining exactly what the "good things in life" are that these people shit on. This edition is commonplace in zines, for the only defining image of the underground is a camera obscura reflection of the dominant culture; its identity is an anti-identity. While this negation is an asset in rebellion it quickly becomes a liability in building. Shaking is a fine rebellion against the go-go, best- and-brightest, yuppie eighties, but it hinders the hard work necessary to construct a new future. The Swiftness irony of the Dead Kennedys' "Kill the Poor" makes for hilarious and biting commentary on our society's "pragmatic" policies toward the unfortunate, but the band's dystopian vision gives no clues to what might replace such policies. To borrow distinctions used by Eric Fromm, the underground is vocal on what it wants freedom from, but often inarticulate in defining the substance of a freedom to.

I regularly ask the zine writers I interview about their vision of an ideal society. Almost to a person, they respond in negative terms. In the perfect future there won't be war, poverty, or environmental degradation, there won't be censorship or stifling mass media, there won't be racism, sexism, or homophobia. But what there will be, other than a vague ideal of people respecting one another, is left unimagined and unsaid.

The emphasis on negative freedom is in part a reflection of how freedom is defined in the dominant world: the libertarian "freedoms from regulation" espoused in the US Bill of Rights. In turn, the importance placed on this definition of freedom is also a reaction against what zinesters see as the limiting of these freedoms today by prudish politicians and profit-minded corporations. As a realm relatively free from political and commercial restriction, zines allow their creators to experiment nearly unfettered freedom — a freedom that many writers and readers would like to see replicated in society at large. However, as Matthew Arnold once wrote, "Freedom ... is a very good horse to ride, but to ride somewhere." The underground culture is so desperate to ride away from the dominant society that may become its only function.

In this escape the underground sets "us" against "them," in identity being contingent upon this distinction. Sometimes "they" are clearly defined structures of political, economic, and cultural power, but "they" can also include the vast majority of ordinary people. Blind to the hypocrisy
around them, hostile to new ideas and lifestyles, buying into mass culture, "the American people" are considered idiosyncratic. Bohemians have worked long and hard, shedding the values and appearance of their upbringing and creating new ones in replacement, why should they turn around and embrace the very things and people they've left? Think again of the pride of Black Leather Times' Amiel G in "loud, joyous proclamations of our freakdom, our otherness, our willingness to be different", and her glee in mass rejection: "So what if we horrified the neighbors; we exulted in one another." 25 The problem is this: in order to effect political change when you have no power, you need your neighbors.

This is not to argue that a radical politics should uncritically accept people as they are. No, the point of all dissenting politics is to work toward changing how most people understand their world. But building an identity around separateness or otherness limits the capability and — more important — the desire to work with others. As the sectarian politics of the late sixties and seventies, and the identity politics of the eighties, have sadly proved, celebrating otherness may be useful as self-therapy but it is relatively useless as political strategy.

What the writer and critic V.S. Pritchett sarcastically wrote of the historical relationship between bohemia and politics in the past holds true today, "if socialism does owe something to Bohemia, what Bohemia really did to art and written in the long run was, of course, to isolate them from society." It's an understandable yet sad fact that in our age of consumer capitalism, "the public can be damned" is more likely to be a rallying cry for the underground than for captains of industry. The latter need the public as workers, consumers and subjects; the former, safe inside their self-enclosed subculture, do not.

Raymond Williams, echoing John Dewey before him, once argued that the strongest weapon in the arsenal of democracy is communication — not as it is but as it should be: with multiple origins and open channels, and with its goal not to dominate, but to achieve "active reception, and living response." Zines succeed admirably in these goals. However, the community of free communication and participation that Dewey and Williams argued for is "common culture", open to all and for all. This is one of the places where the promise of times full staff. While not limiting participation to only the best and brightest of a meritocracy, underground culture nevertheless does not invite the openness and inclusion necessary for a truly democratic culture, partly reflecting the fragmentation in other spheres of society partly out of the fear of getting too big and thus losing intimacy, authenticity, and control, and partly as a
willed result of the underground’s negative identity, zine culture is small culture. And as such it abounds the only large-scale, coherent "continuing culture" today to consumer capitalism.

“The scene was directly political,” explains Exene Cervenka, former singer for the celebrated punk band X, talking about the early punk scene in Los Angeles. “[It] was so political it didn’t even know it was political. It was political like Rosa Parks, who didn’t feel like getting up because her feet hurt, not because she was trying to start a civil rights movement. It was a very honest and viceral reaction to things.” Exene’s story is a nice one, a tale of the dignity of a lone individual of political innocence ... it’s almost a shame that it’s wholly untrue.

Rosa Parks was a committed political activist, a former secretary of the Montgomery AL, chapter of the National Association for the Advance- ment of Colored People. Her refusal to get up — no matter how tired her feet were — was an instrumental act undertaken precisely to start a black bus boycott, and she acted knowing very well that the organizational muscle of black churches and civil rights groups was behind her, Exene’s retelling of the Rosa Parks story says much about how the history of the civil rights movement has been recast — by both liberals and conservatives — over the years, but it also reveals something about the politics of under- ground culture, and specifically about the politics of authenticity.

The ideal of a politics that is “honest and viceral” arises out of justifiable disgust with traditional politics in which ideology and policy are separated from people’s lives. Because the idea of doing something to get something else is identified with self-serving careerism or the profit-driven logic of the market, all forms of instrumentality are suspect. From this disgust comes a distrust of any politics that is detached from immediate, individual experience. This is part of the "personalized politics" of the zine world that I’ve discussed before, a politics that privileges the persona and the intimate over the public and the abstract: politics with a little p instead of a big one.

The result is an underground politics circumscribed by personal con- nection. The editors of Ben’s Dead undertake a laudable campaign to fight sleazy music club practices in their home scene of Los Angeles, dabble in anti-censorship politics as they relate to the communications industry, but politically don’t go much further. Zine writer Missy Lalonde, though active in a food co-op and the Blacklist Mail Order collective, focuses her politics even more narrowly, stating, "I gave up
already on trying to change the world, so now I focus on trying to change my own life for the better." For Missy this doesn't mean becoming 

a self-involved Yuppie, as changing her life for the better is "being myself—being honest, working collaboratively with others, helping people when I can," yet it is still a retreat into a highly personal realm. "Maybe if everyone tried to live their life the way it would be a 

better existence for everyone," Missy muses, but then she adds, "I don't really see the outside world taking on any of these ideals on a massive scale." Ashley Parker Owens takes up the refrain. She is also "not sure of change ... on a grand scale, but for the individual I think that expansion and change is most possible." These changes Ashley calls "Little Rebellion... big things happening inside that no one else can see."

Before becoming too cynical about political change that no one can see, it's important to remember that zines and underground culture are about communication: spreading the word and deed of people who have changed. Ashley, for example, is a tireless networker, setting up projects such as Globe '80 precisely so people can witness and learn from each other's "Little Rebellions." She also successfully reaches out the cultural underground to include others—notably prisoners—in her network. Still, the politics of authenticity, with its demand that the political and personal have no separation, severely limits the scope of engagement. How can you understand NAFTA or GATT, structural inequality, institutionalized racism and sexism, or capitalism without abstractions? The privileging of a politics of "honest and visceral reaction" may guard against hypocrisy, but the price one pays is high: the focus of political discourse is always on the conquest of political initiatives with little attention paid to identifying and grappling with underlying causes.

These politics shape an entire perspective on political strategy. Take for example, "Talkin' Civil Disobedience with Corrine & Bee," an interview in the punk/feminist Femeine. Although some political action groups, like Innu Rights Now and Earth First!, are mentioned, the interview is not really about political issues, nor is it a how-to on civil disobedience. Instead it's a discussion of the personal experience of doing CD. For Corrine and Bee, CD is a political act in itself, and in efficacy and the cause that it serves are of less importance. "Civil Disobedience is so empowering," Corrine concludes, "because you can see part of the effect you are making immediately. You are physically saying, 'No, I don't agree. This is wrong and I cannot go on any longer.'" For Corrine the value of civil disobedience is not in the "effect" of a long-term strategy to bring about political goals, but in itself as an act of non-
compliance, an act of authenticity to one's own beliefs: propaganda of the deed. 44

According to the politics of authenticity, political organizations are something to be wary of. "Fuck the Mass Movement," the anarchist zine Hankyering proclaims, devoting an article to the evils of political organiza-
tions. 45 The demand of such organizations for structure, solidarity, and
strategy necessarily limits personal connection, individuality, and authentic
action. Instead of mass political organization, in the words of Esseen, a
politics that is "so political it didn't even know it was political" is the
underground ideal. Underground theorist Hikim Bey argues that a political
body that refuses to name itself, stand still, and coalesce into a self-
conscious organization has the best chance of surviving a battle with the
powers that be. Perhaps he is right, but it also has no chance of winning.

For it has no demands, no strategy, and, finally, no power.

Responding to a disgruntled, politically minded reader complaining that
Maximum Collective devotes too much time to subcultural issues and
should concentrate on raising money to give to radical organizations, the
editor Tim Yohanning — usually criticized for excess political instrumen-
tality himself — justifies the practices of the zine, and in subsidiary cultural/
political projects such as Blacklist Mail Order and the music space Gilman,
by arguing, "It's the projects themselves — self-governing, independent,
and anti-commercial in nature — that are a poltical statement. It's politics by
example." 46 This "politics by example" is probably the most important
aspect of the politics of the underground. In our age of political cyni-
cism, zines and other underground projects bear witness to alternative
ways of seeing, thinking, and doing. And since zines in particular are a
medium of communication, these political examples are spread around.

"The more we share, the more likely we are to understand each other
and get along. At least that's my hope," writes John "Bud" Banks of
BudZine, echoing a faith I've heard from zine writers many times before. 47
Bud's faith is not entirely misplaced. In an alternative communication
system where there is a conversation among equals, the more people
share the more they potentially will understand each other. If what they
have to share are self-governing, independent and anti-commercial
projects, then these radical ideas will spread. At least that's the hope.

But there are serious limitations to this ideal. It confuses a model of
communication with a model of politics, and politics at the macro level
is about not communication, but contestation. In a society like our own,
rooted in inequality, conflict is unavoidable. Liberal fantasies aside, this
conflict is not the result of those with power not "understanding" the
majority of people who don't. Read the Wall Street Journal, Advertising Age, or Business Week: the powerful are trying to understand the needs and desires of the majority of citizens, and it is part of their job to keep understanding—recall Hill and Knowlton's Dilenschneider scouring the alternative press for "new trends." But this doesn't mean that they understand in order to give away their power—quite the opposite. What products will people buy? What will make them work harder? What political policies will they accept? Those with power make it their business to understand those without it in order to keep and build upon what they have.

The politics of authenticity may be quite effective as a means of communicating and demonstrating dissent, but sooner or later any dissenting politics has to confront conflict that can't be resolved through understanding. Rosa Parks knew this and relied not only upon her act of personal courage to appeal to the conscience of a nation, but also on a self-conscious political movement with the power to force concessions. The underground rejection of political instrumentality and abstraction is understandable, but a politics that dare not speak its name can never make the leap from personal communication to real political effect.

But perhaps that's not its aim. Mike, of $ Aardvarks for Alice, spits out his accusation:

You sit there in your stinking little rooms thinking dire thoughts about your life that's so tough, and the society that represses, about your contemporaries with no clue, about your dead-end, mundane nine-to-five job, about your parents who never understood you anyway, and a government that encourages it all, and you get angry. You listen to avant garde music and read the fringes of mainstream literature. You dress differently and hate those who persecute you for doing so... Sometimes you write down these thoughts and mail them to others who basically think the same things. Then you call it the underground. Then you're dangerous, a true rebel... Bullshit.

As the tone of his essay makes clear, the anger that drives Mike's rant stems from disappointment. He's frustrated that the rebellion expressed through zines and in underground culture is contained at the level of communication. He's angry that it's just talk. "You have no real power," he continues, "all you have are a lot of other rejects like yourselves saying either 'Yeah, Yeah, what he said!' or 'No, that's wrong, listen to what I have to say!' You still can't change one damn thing." Mike is angry because he wants political change and he, like other zine writers, I've read and talked to, feels let down by the impotence of his own culture.
Considering the radical potential of zines, Mike's disappointment and rage are justified. But sometimes—in my drier moments—I think that zines and underground culture are not supposed to change anything. Maybe for all their railing and railing about subverting this and overthrowing that, zines are merely a form of political catharsis, and underground culture is meant only to be a rebellious haven in a heartless world. One of the attributes of a cultural space like the underground is that it allows its participants to engage in a critique of mass society and to construct alternative models of creation, communication, and community. But what happens if all this sound and fury stays safely within the confines of the cultural world? What then does it signify?

As I mentioned briefly before, this was a question that deeply troubled Bertolt Brecht. As a playwright he understood the immense potential of art in capturing the hearts and minds of people, yet as a radical he feared that political art, instead of politicising people, would act as a sort of pressure release valve for dissatisfaction. He was concerned that people would emotionally and emotionally involve themselves in a political struggle, and then when the real problems could only happen by confronting power in the political realm.

Other students of culture and subculture share Brecht’s worries, plus Clarke—one of the early scholars of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (C.C.C.S.)—describes how the working-class youth in 1960s Britain, their traditional community threatened by mass unemployment and foreign immigration, attempted a “magical recovery of community” through their skinhead subculture. Needless to say, nothing the skinheads did—dressing in regimented costume, exaggerating their masculinity, beating up immigrants and hippies—helped to bring back the stable and homogeneous working-class community their parents had enjoyed.

Similarly, what zines offer is a magical illusion of the problems of capitalist society and mass culture. Within the underground culture, the alienation that makes the rest of society is challenged, denounced, battled, and vanquished. But since all of this happens on a purely cultural plane, it has little real effect on the causes of alienation in the greater society. In fact, one could argue that underground culture constitutes anger that desperate might have been expressed in political action. In this light consider once again some witty Mickey Z. joke about “ Doug wasting energy in futile efforts to change the world, and set up your own little world in your own time and space in which you can experience the revolutionary pleasure of thinking for yourself.”

The symbol in the political
There's no doubt, as Joe Gervais states above, that "doing a zine ... is a radical act," but when it becomes the beginning and end of action it may no longer be so radical. "ACTION IS EVERYTHING!" - Be an ACTION GIRL (or boy)! -- writes Sarah in Action Girl Newsletter, a review of primarily feminist and queer zines. But she then defines "action" purely in terms of cultural creation: write for or begin a zine, put on a punk show, start a record label. The selection of zines she reviews makes it clear that Sarah is interested in politics, but the radical intervention she proposes is cultural communication, not political action.

This problem hasn't gone unnoticed in the underground. Tim Yohanan concedes that his efforts to propagate radical political action through MaximumMudravol have met with limited success, while the self-sustaining
cultural network he has helped to cultivate has bloomed. And the realization of the political limits of cultural action—especially circumscribed by an insular sub-culture—finds its way into the songs of such bands as Bad Religion, who, in the chorus to their "Punk Rock Song," acknowledge that.

This is just a punk rock song
Written for people who can see something's wrong
Like ants in a colony we do our share
But there's so many other fucking insects out there
And this is just a punk rock song

As Dan and Chris of burning America remind their underground audience, "It's easy to play the part... but it doesn't really make a difference unless we're doing something."

Bad Religion and the editors of burning America understand that radical culture that isn't embedded in a radical politics poses little threat to the powers that be. Quite the contrary: contemporary capitalism needs cultural innovation in order to open new markets, keep from stagnating, invest old psychodynamics with new meanings, and so on. Far from being a challenge to "The Man", innovations in culture are the seed of a commoner ecology. The position of the snobber vi-a-vi the consumer culture brings to mind Theodor Adorno's snide (but perceptive) remark about the jazz enthusiast: "He pictures himself as the individualist who whistles in the world, but what he whispers is its melody."

So long as the politics of underground culture remain the politics of culture, they will remain a sort of vain politics. As such, I have little hope that underground culture can effect meaningful social change, the very change it cries out for through its articulated critiques and very form. Individuals can and will be radicalized through underground culture, but they will have to make the step to political action themselves. Tragically, the world of radical politics they might step into—movements, groups, parties— is in desperate need of the enthusiasm and innovation the underground culture has in spades.

The political fault of underground culture, however, are not entirely its own. Although underground culture is created in reaction against the mainstream of society, it is also shaped and guided by them. The fact of the matter is that there is no coherent political public that zines can speak to or for. The individual community of zines reflects the fragmentation of society, their unintelligible critique of work and consumption arises from the reality that capitalism is the only game in town, and the...
ris and successes of radical cultural movements have taken place against the backdrop of the collapse of radical political movements—especially on the Left. When underground culture has been more politically efficacious, as the underground press of the 1960s was, it was because the culture spoke to and for a vibrant political body: the New Left. Similarly, the political "successes" of underground culture in England in the late seventies had more to do with their relationship to political organizations such as the National Front and the Socialist Workers Party than with anything intrinsic to the vices or cultural expressions themselves.

In an age where it is fashionable in academic circles to celebrate "conscious resistance to the system open text," as a "site of social struggle,"[33] it is important to consider again the original intention of the early students of cultural resistance: Gramsci, Hobbswain, and the scholars of the CCCS. They were interested in cultural politics not as an end in itself, but in its potential to shift the stage for political formations. In the last analysis, the politics of underground culture, like all "counterhegemonic cultures" and "pre-political" formations, offers no guarantee but not sufficient condition for social change. I don't see this as a pessimistic conclusion, but an honest one. Culture may be one of the spaces where the struggle over ways of seeing, thinking, and being takes place, but it is not where the struggle ends.[40]

VI. Lenin once argued that the reason the Russian Revolution was initially so successful was that Russia had no universal culture—the foundation of meanings, norms, and values upon which politics are built. He went on to say that this was also why the revolution would be so hard to sustain. For just as there was no old culture to retard change, there was also no cultural bedrock on which to construct the new society. Standing Lenin's theory on its head, one could argue the same of the modern underground culture. The reason it has been so vibrant and expansive in a time when radical politics were in retreat is that it has no real politics. In its safe haven it can lambast the powers that be, rail at windmills, conjure up new ways of seeing, being, and doing, but never have to confront power.

But— as was the case with Lenin's dialectic—the reason why this underground culture can never be sustained, nor its ideology expanded intact, outside its own ghetto is also because it has no politics. It has no effective way to repel co-optation by parasitic marketers, no way to reach out to the unconverted, no way to mediate between the annihilation of purity and the danger of selling out, and finally no way to combat the political and economic machine that is the cause of the alienation it