

CHAPTER 2

“PETROLEUM DISTILLATION” BY FIFTEEN

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Having spent the last 14 or so years playing in punk bands, I’ve heard people tell a million stories about their favorite bands, their first shows, their best (and worst) performances, and quite often, some variation of how punk rock shaped who they are as individuals. I could probably tell a lot of these same stories if I wasn’t cursed with an insanely bad memory, and if I actually thought most of them were worth recalling in the first place!

There are, of course, a handful of events that left an imprint in my mind like the mark of a branding iron. One such instance was early in college, when I was reintroduced to punk rock and instantly excited by the prospects of exploring everything possible. I found tons of new music and record labels to check out, but at the time I was still generally turned off by the kinds of bands who just screamed and played music as fast and/or abrasively as possible. Interestingly, I came to realize that a lot of those bands were the ones singing about real issues and the kinds of topics that were becoming increasingly important to me as I had just started college and was getting interested in learning about things that were definitely not part of my education in high school. But while I liked the *idea* of punk bands that had something substantial (or simply angry) to say about what was going

on in the world, a lot of their music just didn't do it for me. Fortunately, my best friend introduced me to his roommate, Chad, who convinced me that if I liked catchy punk songs, then I was crazy for not listening to more bands from the East Bay scene in Berkeley, California—the home of Green Day, as well as many other great punk acts that were mostly new to me. In particular, he told me that I *absolutely needed* to check out the band Fifteen. And so I did. And it was one of the pivotal moments in my punk autobiography.

Fifteen was the first band that really showed me that it was possible to combine melodic songs with an actual message—a way of genuinely “mixing pop and politics,” as musician Billy Bragg once put it. They had a huge influence on me musically and lyrically, but especially politically. Because like so many of my favorite bands, writers, and teachers, Fifteen helped me to see politics as something that wasn't disconnected from my life, or as this painfully alienating set of things done exclusively by elderly government officials, faceless organizations, and the kinds of boring politicians that you see talking on C-Span when you flip past the TV channel on the way to something better. Instead, politics were presented as something rooted in participation, everyday life, art, community, and, most fundamentally, the idea of simply giving a shit about other people and the world in which we live. The band had a number of songs that drew clear links between what we might typically think of as “the personal” and “the political,” but probably the best example I can think of is their song “Petroleum Distillation,” which is the first track on their second record, *The Choice of a New Generation*.

From an outside perspective, writing a song called “Petroleum Distillation” and using punk music to call attention to problems as wide ranging as air pollution and drug abuse might seem rather striking, particularly when most people tend to think that punk was (or is) just about Mohawks, tattoos, or a form of angst rebellion limited to one's teenage years. While some bands do fit this description, Fifteen is part of a lineage of punk in which young people educate themselves about politics and are much more interested in talking about real issues than they are in trying to simply shock people with middle fingers and weird haircuts (neither of which are all that shocking nowadays). Like people in various punk scenes throughout the U.S. and countries throughout the world, Fifteen participated in benefit shows for progressive causes, tried to raise awareness about punks' failure to put their ethics into action, and idealistically called for people to change both the world and themselves.

“Petroleum Distillation” starts off with a super catchy bass line that forms the melody of the song, and it's important to mention this up front because people sometimes talk about the relevance of punk songs as if the only thing that really matters are the lyrics. Nothing could be further from the truth because there are plenty of things that you can hear someone say on

a microphone or on a record, but it’s the ability of a musician to combine ideas with a good song that actually gets people to *listen* to what’s being said, instead of simply hearing it. Any true fan of punk or Hip Hop will tell you as much, regardless of how one defines a “good” song or expresses that sentiment. My point here is that even if you (the reader) and I have very different tastes in music, we can’t think about the significance of songs by pulling lyrics apart from their music. In the same way, we can’t really learn anything significant about a piece of music by extracting it from the larger social, cultural, and political contexts in which it was written, performed, purchased, remixed, or covered by a different artist—it’s like trying to learn something interesting about a person without knowing where she’s from, how she spends her time, what her family is like, and what kinds of things make her curious, passionate, depressed, or delighted.

With that being said, I want to talk about the lyrics to “Petroleum Distillation” because I think the song not only brings up important environmental and social issues, it also offers a unique point of entry for thinking about how people make sense of concepts like oppression and freedom, which are, after all, pretty difficult to contemplate without reference to each other—“oppression” is a vague concept if we don’t have a baseline idea of what “freedom” means, and vice versa. By connecting the dots between some of the personal and social meanings of oppression and freedom, the song radically challenges conventional wisdom at the heart of American society and simultaneously provides a very basic introduction to some of the environmentalist and anarchist ideals that garnered support in various punk scenes from the late 1970s through the present day. More broadly, the lyrics offer a radical critique of capitalism by questioning some of its basic tenets (i.e., private property) as well as the everyday activities (i.e., driving cars) that are normalized or made part of our collective “common sense” in a capitalist society. Not everyone will agree with Fifteen’s positions, but one doesn’t necessarily have to agree with or even like a songwriter in order to try and understand what the artist is saying and why he or she is saying it.

In order to “unpack” the ideas expressed in the lyrics and further explain what they mean, it is useful to look at three intersecting themes that I see as the most prominent in the song: 1) capitalism as the oppression of humanity; 2) pollution as humanity’s oppression of the Earth; and 3) autonomy as freedom from oppression. Before I elaborate and begin to dissect the lyrics in a way that is useful for my purposes, I think it is crucial to first get a clear sense of how the song actually sounds and feels. The best way to do this is by listening to the tune from start to finish (the original recording is posted on YouTube) while reading through the lyrics in the order in which they are sung.

CAPITALISM AS THE OPPRESSION OF HUMANITY

There are several things that really stick out when you listen to “Petroleum Distillation,” and arguably the most prominent is the singer’s raspy repetition of the chorus: “I know, I know, I know, I know that life has become slavery” (Ott, 1994). When Jeff Ott—the singer/guitarist/songwriter in Fifteen—invokes the institution of slavery in this song, he’s really doing two things at once. First, in the most general sense he’s using slavery as a metaphor to describe how we’re all basically tethered to a way of life that doesn’t necessarily make sense (“a little too easy seems a little too hard today”) and is oftentimes harmful to ourselves and others in ways that we not tend to easily comprehend. But the song also uses slavery as an analogy for the social conventions and laws that quite literally deny us the ability choose the kinds of lives that we want to live. The message is not that capitalism turns us into slaves who have to wear shackles, have no freewill, or experience the kind of dehumanizing, institutionalized violence doled out to Black and Indigenous peoples throughout much of U.S. history. Rather, the lyrics ask us to think about how the interrelated institutions of work, rent, and private property serve as invisible shackles that inhibit our ability to make truly free choices and, by extension, our ability to live as free people.

When Ott sings the lines “paying money for four walls leaves the slavery intact” and “it’s against the law to sleep on the ground in God’s land” (Ott, 1994), he’s calling attention to the fact that, first and foremost, people are forced to work in order to pay for housing, regardless of whether they love or hate their jobs. This seems like a very normal proposition to most people, and it is normal so long as we don’t consider housing a human right or, for example, that people lived for thousands of years on this continent (and throughout much of the world) without adhering to the “normal” idea of being forced to work for a wage in order pay money for shelter. Most of us willingly comply with this arrangement, and we may not even think twice about the dominant ideology, or worldview, that justifies the arrangement itself. But the important part to recognize here is that we don’t actually have the ability to “opt out” of this system if we don’t like it. That is to say, the threat of criminal punishment and/or imprisonment ensures nearly universal compliance (this is the less invisible part of our “invisible shackles”). For example, if someone becomes unemployed or simply wants to spend the majority of his time on activities that do not earn a paycheck—such as raising children, doing volunteer work, practicing music, or making art—then he will eventually get evicted for not paying rent and he will end up homeless. If someone becomes homeless—as was the case with Fifteen’s singer, who was homeless for years in Berkeley, California—that person becomes a criminal by default since there are laws in nearly every U.S. city that make it illegal for people to sleep, hang out (loitering), and in some cases even sit or lie down (sit/

lie ordinances) in public spaces as well as on private property (trespassing). Once a person has a criminal record, it becomes incredibly difficult to find a job or a place to live; and if one gets enough criminal violations, then one can also be locked up in prison, which is the ultimate way of denying a person his or her freedom (and often forcing one to do unpaid work that is, for all intents and purposes, a form of slave labor).

Long story short: this song is part of a much longer history of political critique that argues that we are free in a capitalist society only to the extent that we do what we’re told and we don’t question the cultural norms, social institutions, or laws that “leave the slavery intact.”

POLLUTION AS HUMANITY’S OPPRESSION OF THE EARTH

Any punk song named after the process of refining oil clearly has a message about the environment, and “Petroleum Distillation” points to some of the specific as well as the general ways in which human beings oppress the natural world. In addition to beginning the first verse by talking about fossil fuel emissions (“the clouds arising from the cars we drive”), Ott tallies a list of pollutants that negatively impact the environment including lead, toxic waste, fluorocarbons, and petroleum distillates. Instead of just simply pointing the finger elsewhere, the lyrics make it clear that Fifteen is self-reflective about everyone’s role in the ecological problems they’re addressing, including the band itself; for example, they use possessive pronouns to talk about “the cars *we* drive,” or to note that “*we’re* all one sick race” (Ott, 1994, italics added). They make it clear that the political problem of environmental pollution is also a very personal issue, and the lyrics in the second to last verse draw explicit comparisons between the act of abusing oneself (particularly with drugs) and abusing the Earth: “The water’s my heart, it’s been broken with booze and drugs and shooting up paste [heroin]” (Ott, 1994). Seeing such problems in this way make it possible for anyone to relate to one of the lines that repeats in slight variations throughout the song: “I’m afraid my children are going to have to watch the world waste away.” Indeed, one of the song’s strong points in this regard is how they simultaneously point to various levels of connection that exist within the environment (the links between the ground, sky, water, and sun), as well as between people and the Earth (spiritually and biologically), and also between human’s industrial byproducts and natural ecosystems.

AUTONOMY AS FREEDOM FROM OPPRESSION

With all the criticisms that this song makes about capitalism, organized religion (“Costs two dollars a minute and additional charges to pray to God

today”), environmental destruction, and even drug abuse, one could easily assume that Fifteen is cynical about the ability for people to create substantial changes in society. But the last verse actually offers a really positive vision for imagining a different world, and it begins with the assertion that “autonomy shall reward itself with freedom” (Ott, 1994). Autonomy is a concept that essentially describes freewill and agency, which is a way of thinking about individuals living their lives independently and making decisions based on their freewill, without coercion. Anarchism, which is a political philosophy based on the idea that people are capable of governing themselves without leaders or hierarchies, is one of many political paradigms that recognizes that the functioning of a free society relies on people having a healthy amount of autonomy. Fifteen is clearly indebted to this line of thinking, and like many other anarchists, socialists, and libertarians, they also recognize that a free society is one in which people collectively create the conditions in which *everyone* can enjoy autonomy. In other words, this isn’t an argument for people to just “do their own thing”; it is a way of seeing freedom as something that challenges oppression on all fronts, whether that oppression comes from the State, from powerful corporations, or from a mindset that promotes the domination of people or the environment. As part of this collective vision of freedom, the band not only argues that humility is a path toward peace, they also suggest that we can all come together (“the integration of humanity”) if we are able get beyond the desire for material things (“the dissolution of possession”) and realize our true obligations to “our lives and our Earth” (Ott, 1994). The last part is crucial inasmuch as the song reminds us that we need to be mutually responsible for our own collective liberation and for how we treat the planet that sustains all life.

REFERENCE

Ott, J. (1994). Petroleum distillation [Recorded by Fifteen]. On *Choice of a new generation* [CD]. Berkeley, CA: Lookout Records.