

The Failure Of Punk Rock
In America

This is so unique, so different, so well-researched and so interesting that I simply could not expect most of a student assignment. You should be very proud of yourself; this speaks so well of your intelligence and your originality. (The cassette appendix is a novel idea, too.)

Congratulations!

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Submitted By:

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Mrs. Dahl

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Period two

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-Preface-

It was in December of 1977 that I first became aware of "punk rock". The Sex Pistols had arrived in America and, because it was believed they were the "new Beatles," TV news personnel converged on J.F.K. Airport to cover them. Roger Grimsby, anchor man of Eyewitness News, summed them up by deriding their coy sex-and-violence name and sardonically denying their being anything new but this week's garbage. During his denunciation, there appeared on the screen a film clip of the Sex Pistols in full swing, performing in a nightclub. Like all other viewers, I was unable to tell how they sounded or what they were singing, as Mr. Grimsby spoke over their entire performance. I could only agree with him; they appeared to be no more than four ugly teenagers out to make a fast buck.

Turning off the television set, I went upstairs to listen to my new "Foreigner" album, what I considered to be "decent rock music." Three weeks later, Roger Grimsby informed me that the Sex Pistols had disbanded in San Francisco, after playing their last concert there to their largest audience ever. I was indifferent.

When I visited San Francisco in April, 1978, during Spring vacation, there was not a trace of the Sex Pistols. Although, I saw more of the city than the average tourist, I came across no signs of punk rock, no punkers whatsoever. It seemed to me that

this ridiculously funny fad had come and gone. Soonafter, I bought a record which had hit number one, and seemed to be the acceptable face of both disco and new-wave music. It was "Heart of Glass" by Blondie, an American band whom had already attained giant success in almost all of the free world except their homeland. Through the investigations of the rock media, it was revealed that they were from New York, and had been trying for two years to break into the U.S. charts. It was even intimated they were a punk band, for their origins were in the Bowery bar CBGB's, notorious home of American punk rock in New York. Although they weren't punks, other bands from CBGB's, mentioned in magazine articles alongside Blondie definately were. Through such a corollary, I was introduced to American bands such as the Ramones and the Heartbreakers, but more importantly, to English bands such as the Clash and the Sex Pistols. Their shocking, loud album covers were enticing, but did not alleviate the fear of wasting the exorbitant album price (then five dollars) and, thus, remained out of my reach for the time being.

In November, Roger Grimsby informed me that Sid Vicious, former bass guitarist of the Sex Pistols, had been indicted for the alledged murder of his girlfriend. "It figures he'd do that," I thought, not even questioning the fact that he hadn't been proven guilty yet. "She probably deserved it, too." Soonafter, Sid attempted suicide twice, both unsuccessfully. On February 2, 1979, Mr. Grimsby submitted his final update on this long running story; "Sid is no longer Vicious," quoth Grimsby, "he's dead." He had died from a heroin overdose which he sustained even after hospital detoxification.

By this time my brother had been playing guitar for over a year. On a whim, he decided to assemble a punk rock band to perform in the Westhill talent show, against serious bands. With a singer renamed "Kenny Death," and two other eleventh-hour musician-friends, he performed a two song set under the name "Palix." Among bands with massive, professional equipment, they brought two small guitar amplifiers and a learner's drum kit; they had rehearsed only twice. Their first song was a self composed ditty called "Beat Me." The second, dedicated to the late Sid Vicious, was a John Lennon classic, "Cold Turkey." In the audience, some booed their noise-music, but many appreciated their joke. It was the closest Westhill High School had ever ventured towards punk rock.

On December 3, 1979, inspired by my brother, and by my experience in past musical training, I bought a bass guitar. This was a pivotal point in my musical views; because of my rudimentary knowledge of the instrument, I found that I could play only punk rock convincingly. From that point forward, I understood the concepts behind, which was what I had missed previously. In a long chain of events, I bought the Sex P'istols album and loved it. It is the only album of mine which has actually deteriorated due to excessive playing. Later, I ventured to Greenwich Village, the Mecca of punk, and returned several times, buying the Clash's albums, the Sex Pistols' imported albums, and other related goods.

By 1981, I was intrigued by the Westhill "society": It seemed that punk and new wave, earthshattering in Europe, had not even touched Westhill. Other than in isolated cases, most Westhill students believed "the clash" was when one wore green trousers

with a purple shirt. On a broader basis, this seemed also to apply to most of the United States. I was intrigued to try and find out why this monumental English trend had been recieved so poorly here.

Eric Gladstone

Spring 1982

Unlike many other trends in the brief history of rock and roll, punk rock has left many threads untangled, many stones unturned; there remains today a running debate on many of its most pertinent aspects. Rock critics have varying theories as to when the punk era began, when it ended, and what it entailed in the meantime. Many are confused by the true political, social, and psychological implications of the movement, and often they infer incorrect concepts. Historians tend to date the induction of punk rock simply as November 5, 1975, the day of the Sex Pistols' first performance; others point to the Ramones' performances in New York, earlier in the same year. Some refer farther back to the English Rhythm and Blues revivalists, Dr. Feelgood, and their return to the basics of music earlier in the decade.¹ On the flipside of the same disc, a great many cite the New York Dolls, who began in 1972, or the earlier Iggy Pop and the Stooges, who began in 1969. By far, the most plausible of these theories is that of the New York Dolls.

They might have taken some cues from the Stooges, but what the New York Dolls really wanted to be was an American, garage band Rolling Stones. And that's exactly what they were. Everything about them was pure outrage. And too live for the time: 1972-75 mostly. They set New York on fire, but the rest of the country wasn't ready for it.²

Londoner Malcolm McLaren, in 1975, was already a "trend-setting anti-fashion couturier with an art school background" when he went to Greenwich Village in New York. There he found the al-

¹Jann Wenner, ed., Rolling Stone's History of Rock and Roll (New York: Rolling Stone Press, 1980), p. 456.

²Lester Bangs, Blondie (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), p. 23.

ready popular New York Dolls "and ended up managing them for seven months."

On his return, he set about making his vision of a rumbling, anarchic, energetic and noisy rock scene, the like of which hadn't been seen in Britain for ten years, a reality.¹

The New York Dolls, indeed, directly influenced the beginnings of two rock cultures in both London and New York. But they were not wholly original; they too had undeniable roots, and did nothing to inspire the social concepts or attitudes of dress seen in latter-day punk. For these, one must search farther back, indeed all the way back to the original rock and roll of the 1950's. Just as '50's rock and roll had it's origins in the Jazz, Blues, Bluegrass and Folk of twenty years previous, so did punk have it's origins in the Rhythm and Blues, Rockabilly, Skiffle, and Bop music of the 1950's.

When the original rock and roll first emerged in the 1950's, it wrought reactions uncannily similar to the more recent criticism of punk. Racist radio listeners and parents of teens were frightened into censorship and banning. The media declared it totally unmusical and blamed it for juvenile delinquency, sexual depravity, and devil worship. In other words, these were the same criticisms that later were applied to punk; thus, punk rock has existed, in some form or another, since the very beginning of rock and roll. "they just didn't call it that." Ever since it began, rock indoctrinated certain unconscious, but undeniable,

¹Caroline Coon, 1988; The New Wave Punk Rock Explosion(New York: Hawthorn Books, 1978), p.3.

characteristics. Rock and roll was the "ultimate populist art form, democracy in action;" anyone could do it, all one needed was an attitude, the nerve.¹ This concept of "grass roots" rock and roll remained, appearing in isolated incidents, until in the '70's it could no longer be held back.

These isolated incidents were not recognizably many, but very significant, as they paved the way for the impending punk "explosion." The idea that a truck driver named Elvis Presley could endear millions with his untrained voice was astounding, and the pelvic thrusts characteristic of his performance were censored as much as possible. The Beatles and Rolling Stones could be seen in a similar light; before they became famous, they were careless in dress, dirty, and played cheap imitations of their predecessors' songs. The Beatles were at one time notorious for swearing, drinking and eating onstage during performances. None of them had any formal musical training whatsoever.

In the early '60's there was punk rock: "Louie, Louie" by the Kingsmen being probably the most prominent example; it was rude, it was crude, anybody could play it, but so what? It'll be around and people everywhere will still be playing it as long as there's a rock and roll left at all. It's already lasted longer than "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band."²

"Sgt. Pepper" was the direct inspiration for the "Summer of Love" in 1967, which, for a time, suppressed the idea of raw rock with the concepts of psychedelia and experimentation with drugs.

¹Bangs, p. 21.

²Ibid, p. 21.

However, in 1969, Iggy Pop and the Stooges emerged with their first record. They were rudimentary, raw, and boorish, and thus gained only a small cult following. The America ensconced in Woodstock-type festivals was not ready for such a harsh group. Unbeknownst to the public, they were not an isolated incident, but a warning for an impending storm. This storm began a few years later in the arty Greenwich Village section bordering the sleazy Bowery in New York. The term "punk rock," which had actually been coined before the Stooges' appearance, had a true application here. Bands were formed, and following the New York Dolls' example, wore glitter costumes, uniforms, and "sex garb." Many of these bands were without direction, equipment, or talent. But one of these bands was unprecedented in that they wore none of these costumes; they were a cross between the Bowery Boys and the Beatles, named the Ramones.

The Ramones were punk rock. They wore intentionally torn jeans, t-shirts, cheap basketball sneakers and leather jackets. They abused their instruments, playing without any sense of propriety or style. Their music was "fast and aggressive," "deliberately simple," called by critics a "shock treatment" that was, nevertheless, "fresh and spontaneous."¹ But, in reality, the Ramones were the only true American punk band to achieve any notoriety, and however laudable they may be, they were entirely ignorant of any directed protest and equally uninterested in such.

¹ _____, "A Square's Guide to Punk Rock and New Wave Music," Glamour, July, 1978 p. 108.

America, for the greater part, was, and still is, unappreciative of the Ramones; England, however, was not.

In the summer of 1976, the Ramones did their first tour of England. Kids all over the nation went crazy. They saw how easy the music was to play, how exiting it was, how much fun, and they went out and got instruments and did it.¹

Nevertheless, by the time the Ramones reached the British shores, the storm there had already broke. For a long while, English teens had been looking for an expressive vehicle, and they had found it in punk. In 1976, fans realized their dissatisfaction with their heroes, the "millionaire rock stars." They felt deserted. In an article of Melody Maker, a British music trade paper, it was noted as such.

Rock was meant to be good fun. The inability to see the stars or to play their music is making a whole generation of fans feel depressingly inadequate.²

The music situation in the early years of the decade had grown steadily worse. Popular bands, such as the Pink Floyd and Yes, relied steadily on their high technology and engineering skills. It was difficult for ordinary laymen to identify with a college degree, and there were no alternatives of expression for the working-class teenagers of England.

¹Bangs, p. 21.

²Coon, p. 10.

The seeds of punk were sown when the live rock circuit almost died in the early '70's. Discos took the place of live acts--it was cheaper to play records than pay a band. Touring became a marketing device to promote a band's latest album. The bands who couldn't afford the large sums needed to buy themselves onto these tours were forced to play in pubs to audiences over-seventeen who were there as much for the drink as the music.¹

Thus, when the Sex Pistols came along, they decided to kill this era of the '60's once and for all, and to create a unique '70's sound. "Disco," they said, "was the final straw."² The Sex Pistols represented the outright disgust of their generation. Unemployment was rampant in England, and most teenagers out of the corrupt school system found themselves on the dole. These teens were too young to remember the "swinging London" of the '60's; they rebuked the rock stars' songs of unrealistic love. They became "acutely conscious of class discrimination" and felt anger from outside. The groups that arose marked "a change in the political drama of rock and roll."³ Not only was the music "raw and driving," but it was coupled with lyrics "angry and insulting." These lyrics were deliberately directed to social, political and musical protest. Once again, rock and roll was recognized as not just music, but also as an attitude.⁴ Once again, fans and performers became interchangeable. Any one in the audience could easily have done as well on stage as the bands.

¹Coon, p. 3.

²_____, "Punk Rockers Roll London," Time, 11 July 1977, p. 47.

³Mark G. Miller, "New Wave From England," Horizon, March 1978, p. 78.

⁴Proctor Lippincott, "Punk Rock," Scholastic Search, 3 November 1977, p. 15.

They dressed similarly, off stage and on, in torn, painted, pinned, and obscene clothing, and wore shocking clothes, as well as countenances. The somewhat "yellow journalism" of the current English press was quick to exaggerate isolated incidents of violence into a trend of genuine brutality. Most of the punkers' hostilities, however, were saved for the opposition--hippies and businessmen.

I haven't seen a hippy in two weeks. That's something! They let it all--the drug culture--flop around them. They were dosed out of their heads the whole time. 'Yea, man, peace and love. Don't let anything affect you. Let it walk all over you but don't stop it. We say Bollocks!(sic) If it offends you, stop it. You've got to or else you become apathetic and complacent yourself. You end up with a mortgage watching TV with 2.4 kids out in suburbia--and that's just disgusting. All those hippies are becoming like that. All that's different from them and those they were reacting against, is that they've got long hair and bowler hats!¹

With those words, Johnny Rotten, singer for the Sex Pistols, summed up the source of the punkers' aggressions. Since their indoctrination, the Sex Pistols quickly became the personification of the punk movement and, at the same time, the leading band. They were a deliberate break with their predecessors; They refused to play bars, and sang abrasive lyrics expressing hatred, cynicism, contempt of suburbia, and anti-love. Their popularity relied on the facts that their music was created by peers of the

¹Coon, p. 47.

audience, and that they sang not only to the punks, but about them. Like the Ramones, they were oblivious to musical finery or propriety. Their second bassist, Sid Vicious, boasted that he was the worst guitarist in the world. They were interested in having fun but, more importantly, in making their statements clear, which could be best summed up in their own words: "all were trying to do is destroy everything."¹ Through public statements such as this, they evoked a great deal of maniacal denunciations from both the British press and Parliament. Hearing of the release of a Sex Pistols record entitled "Anarchy For the U.K.," the Parliament released an official statement to wit: "If they mean to destroy us, we'd bloody well destroy them first."²

The Parliament attempted to do just that. In cooperation with district councils, they managed to ban the Sex Pistols from performing virtually anywhere in the U.K., while continuing to tax their income as British citizens. The Pistols survived by touring Europe for the time being; the ban did not destroy their popularity, but rather heightened it. Johnny Rotten was credited with effectively "inventing" punk, and in one article was compared to a biblical prophet. Their widespread appeal appeared obvious when the banned single "God Save The Queen" rose to number one on the national sales charts, and their first album entered the charts at number one--the first album to do so since the Beatles.

One of the many groups to form due to seeing the Sex Pistols was the Clash. Although inspired by them, the Clash were quite un-

¹Wenner, ed., p. 455.

²_____, "Cult Hero: Johnny Rotten," High Times, October 1977, p. 1.

like the Sex Pistols and rose to a rivaling degree of fame. The Clash were more political in stance and less sociological than the Pistols.

The Clash were able to rationalize the punk ethos, laugh at it, and put it across with a sound that was altogether their own. The Sex Pistols performed as wreckers, the Clash as partisans. If the Pistols' tunes were symbolist, the Clash's were rhetorical: the explanations Rotten offered in interviews went into Jones' and Strummer's songs. The Clash's appeal to reggae rebellion was explicit and their lyrics addressed not the social bases of reality, but the system.¹

The Clash, led by guitarists Mick Jones and Joe Strummer, were quick to draw the correlation between the Jamaican-English reggae they had grown up with, and the punk rock they now created.

They drew a prevalent theme of a "spiritual battle catalyzed by song," and created each song as "a battle that might conceivably be won."² Like reggae, punk represented a culture created for outcasts either unfit or unwilling to live in society. Punk and reggae also both have a basis in strife-torn class systems. But unlike reggae, punk was intended only for the young, and white. Because of such differences, in England even punks had potentially more access to recording contracts and money than the least radical Jamaican reggae singer. From the outset, in fact, many punk bands secured contracts with major record companies. Different from most successful bands, the Clash did not leave their protests behind, but rather with each album heightened them.

¹Wenner, ed., p. 458.

²Debra Rae Cohen, "For the Clash, Music IS Part of the Message," The New York Times, 24 May 1981, p. f-14.

The clear goal of the Clash has been to grow both musically and politically, at once, as if one side was a necessary means to the other. Indeed many argued even in 1977 that the Clash, not the Sex Pistols, were the greater punk band. They may well be the greater rock and roll band. . . that they were not the greater punk band has been their salvation.¹

Led by the Clash and the Sex Pistols, punk rock grew to be a national craze, an obsession which alienated all adults and inspired all teenagers. Hundreds upon hundreds of new bands arose, jubilantly angry at the world. A microcosm, of sorts, was created, including all punks and excluding others. Within this, they created new cliches, idols, stigma and castes. This closed society was not, however, absolved from the outside world. Punks were greatly manipulated by the Fleet Street media. They were falsely accused of many horrors and misaligned with the English Nazi Party. Their crimes of disloyalty to the queen, being on the dole, and squatting in vacant homes represented real national dilemmas. Nevertheless, due to this media manipulation, throughout the "Summer of Hate" in 1977, almost all major venues prohibited punk rock performances--an unprecedented censorship.

Despite the newspapers' scandalous reports, and the government bans, the punkers' protest was remarkably passive. They were merely unemployed working class teenagers, primarily, seeking an outlet to vent their frustrations and attention for their antics.² As punk was further analyzed by the music press, it came to be generally understood entailing attitude, dress and

¹Wenner, ed., p. 458.

²Tony Schwartz, "Rock Bottom," Newsweek, 20, June, 1977 p. 81.

style as well as musical content.

British punk fashion, if not on the street, developed mostly in the Kings Road boutique SEX, owned and operated by Malcolm McLaren, manager of the Sex Pistols. Here were sold risqué t-shirts, arcane '50's cruise-wear, fantasy S & M wear and occasionally, rubber suits. This was also the origin of the swastika t-shirt. The safety-pinned clothing was created by the Sex Pistols themselves. When Sid Vicious came home one day to find a pair of his pants torn up, he took safety pins and closed all the tears in them. Johnny Rotten followed suit by buying an entire suit, shredding it and pinning it back together.

By the end of the "Summer of Hate," hostility was growing between the punk contingents in England and the United States. Comparisons were being drawn, and the English disliked being coupled with the Americans, having only tenuous connections. The Americans seemed to have little identity, widely imitating '60's English pop stars and wearing nostalgic clothing, mostly leather jackets and jeans. They seemed to want to adopt the stance of the English punks without the strife involved. The Americans were also mostly in their mid- or late twenties; British punks rarely admitted it if they were over eighteen. Whereas the British movement grew from anger and hostility, the Americans' sprang from boredom, and from a distaste for pop-rock. While the British were offensive and politically disgusted, the Americans were arty, cool, and politically either unaware or indifferent. The hostility between the English and the Americans, however, was based mostly on misinformation.

. . . the English and American punk contingents were hardly destined to be a united front; all the Limeys thought the CBGB's bands (main bar for punk rock in New York) were a lot of spoiled suburban affluent dilettante junkies, and all the Americans thought the London safety-pin and bondage trousers brigade were a self-righteously "political," speed-nattering mob of pogoing poseurs who were all too short, no doubt owing to their hideous culinary practices.¹

The American contingent defended themselves by citing the Ramones' inspirational tour of England in 1976. This proved somewhat invalid, however.

. . . while the oh-so-studied primitivism of the Ramones certainly made itself felt in England, so in 1957 did the 'big rock and roll sound' of Bill Haley, which did not make Bill Haley the Beatles any more than it makes the Ramones the Sex Pistols.²

In fact, critics seemed to agree later that Johnny Rotten "has probably influenced more American New Wave musicians than any other Englishman."³

When the Sex Pistols finally came to America, in January of 1978, their tour was a failure. They were only allowed twenty day visas, which they used to tour "redneck" bars in the sun belt, arousing as much opposition and controversy as possible. Southerners were adamant that they would not allow this "devil's music" and barbarism to succeed in their country. This hostility affected the Pistols themselves, too, and after the largest punk rock concert ever in San Francisco, the group splintered. The intensity of their lifestyle and the pressure from their followers had become unbearable. That was the formal, but not historical conclusion.

¹Bangs, p. 8.

²Werner, ed., p. 456.

³Miller, p. 78.

In Britain, in particular, punk rock created a punk community that rejected the '60's ideals of 'peace and love' as unrealistic, but harbored some equally idealistic notions about changing the world.¹

By the time other punk bands crossed the Atlantic from Britain, the stigma of their culture had become more stifling than that of the one they had revolted against. Their presence made no difference anyhow; punk had failed and was already slowly declining in America. There were many causes to this effect. In Britain, because pop radio was so poor, no one relied on it to achieve recognition. Instead, the music trade papers were looked to.² These covered the punk rock scene extensively, although often adding to its ill-repute. Yet the Sex Pistols' single "God Save the Queen" reached number one on the national charts while being totally banned from any radio play. In the U.S.A. exposure of music depended (and still does) on it's wide network of pop radio stations. Unfortunately, punk rock recieved scarcely any radio play on commercial stations, while it ironically recieved wonderful reviews in music magazines. Radio station managers saw no future or sucessful elements in the music.

When punk first hit widespread popularity in Britain, enterprising American record executives "converged" on London to see if it could be profitably exported. They felt as if they were screening horror films to find out if as discriminating an audience as Americans would be "frightened" away from it. For the greater part, the executives feared this to be, and did not sign

¹Robert Palmer, "The Pop Life," The New York Times, 20 January 1982, p. c-20.

²Asia Locke, "Profiling the Psychedelic Purs," The Aquarian, 23 September 1981, p.48.

many acts.¹ When the Clash finally came abroad in 1979, they noted that their audiences were largely composed of students, trendies, and artists who "cruised the punk periphery like tourists."²

Within a year of the Sex Pistols' break-up, Johnny Rotten re-emerged into the public eye with a new group and a new name, his legal one, John Lydon. The group, which he referred to as a communications company, was called "Public Image Ltd." and was designed to be completely non-rock. In an interview for it, he revealed the unattained goal of the Sex Pistols.

The Sex Pistols is going to be the absolute end of rock and roll, which I thought it was. Unfortunately, the majority of the public, being the senile animals that they are, got that wrong.³

In this sense, then, punk has failed altogether. If the Sex Pistols did anything at all in the U.S., it was to inspire an entire new wave of rock-n-rollers, continuing to the present. Perhaps a movement such as punk could never happen in the U.S. Because of the size of the U.S., with differing regions and nationalities, it is more difficult to attain a sense of unity other than patriotism. And since the Vietnam war, there has been a reactionary trend among young people not to be involved heavily in politics or protests. The U.S. was also in a state of relative prosperity five years ago. At any rate, punk rock has left its mark, however indelible, on society, and perhaps in such hard times as are upon us^{now} this mark may become more apparent.

¹ _____, "Punk Rock Analyzed," New Republic, 24 March 1979, p.27

² _____, "The Best Gang In Town," Time, 5 March 1979, p.68.

³Public Image Ltd. Interview, Tom Snyder, NBC, 25 June 1980.

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-Appendix-

(Refer to accompanying audio cassette.)

1. The Sex Pistols on San Francisco Radio, 1978.
2. "The Very Name 'Sex Pistols'" 1978.
3. "Heart of Glass"--Blondie, 1978.
4. "Louie, Louie"--The Kingsmen, 1962.
5. "Kill City"--Iggy Pop, 1977.
6. "Hound Dog"--Elvis Presley, 1956.
7. "Johnny B. Goode"--Chuck Berry, 1957.
8. "Johnny B. Goode"--The Sex Pistols, 1976.
9. "Sex Offender"--Blondie, 1976.
10. "Government Center"--The Modern Lovers, 1975.
11. "Anarchy In the U.K." "Pretty Vacant" "Liar" "Problems" "God Save the Queen"--The Sex Pistols, 1977.
12. "I'm So Bored With The U.S.A." "White Riot" "London's Burning" "Career Opportunities" "Police and Thieves" "Hate and War"--The Clash, 1977.
13. "Your Generation" "One Hundred Punks" "Ready Steady Go"--Generation X, 1977.
14. "Anarchy In the U.S.A." "Belsen Was A Gas" "No Fun"--The Sex Pistols live in San Francisco, January 1978.
15. "My Way"--Sid Vicious, 1978.
16. "The Magnificent Seven" "Barkrobber"--The Clash, 1980.