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A Specter is Haunting the Hood: Traces of Socialism in Rap Music

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Abstract

This article aims to demonstrate the links between the Hip Hop Culture -especially rap music- and the ideas of philosophers, politicians and activists of the left view. Although rap music has turned into a multi-million dollar industry in United States, Hip Hop artists maintain the revolutionary world view of the black freedom movement, which has not ceased since the early days of slavery. Starting from the mid-20th century, the movement became much more organized and aimed to equip black people with socialist ideas, hoping to create an extremely educated and self-sufficient community. The ideas formed by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Mao Tse-tung, Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and especially Black Panthers Party are still embraced by the Hip Hop Culture and can be traced in various songs and performances. This paper tries to draw attention to such examples, especially in rap songs.

Keywords: Hip Hop Culture; Rap Music; Black Freedom Movement; Socialism; Black Panthers Party; Immortal Technique; Public Enemy

In 1848, Karl Marx was addressing the proletarians and telling them to organize and resist the system; that they have nothing but their chains to lose (Marx and Engels 1970, p.77). A similar call was echoing in the black ghettos in 2003. Revolutionary Hip Hop band, dead prez, was addressing the poor people and telling them to do the same thing, in their 2003 song *Scared to Die*:

*I ain't scared to die, I ain't got shit to lose
Plus I ain't happy here livin' on a planet full of fools
I ain't scared to die, I ain't got shit to lose
Plus I ain't happy here, no, I ain't happy of your family.*

Actually, politically conscious rap is an accepted and appreciated subgenre of rap music. As I have become more acquainted with the genre, I decided to trace the development of this conscience in Hip Hop culture. In his 2004 book, *We Want Freedom*, Mumia Abu-Jamal narrates how willingly socialism was embraced and applied in the black community in United States. Founded in 1966, The Black Panther Party was highly organized and determined to teach every aspect of socialism to its members and their community (Canon 1970, p.6). Abu-Jamal tells that a full-functional capitalist government was not too enthusiastic about the subject and immediately the necessary steps such as false news on media, informants, spies and endless police raids (Abu-Jamal 2004, p.122).

Eventually the party was disbanded, but the USA Government was too late. There was an entire generation armed with the ideas of revolutionaries like Malcolm X and the Black Panthers.

When academic resources are investigated, it is not hard to spot the lack of interest on Hip Hop culture (unlike black freedom movement), despite some of its branches are turned into multi-million dollar industries. Academics, including African Americans, are ignoring the ties between the black freedom movement and Hip Hop culture (Alridge 2005, p. 226). It is not easy to blame them, as most of the mainstream media portray rap songs as if they are solely about killing people, dealing drugs, degrading women and getting rich, eventually. But it is important to note that these are only the products that are being speculated on. In reality, Hip Hop culture, and its rap music branch is much deeper than that. It would be wrong to speculate about a great culture through a few selected songs that glorify the gangster lifestyle. And, I must add, even that those heavily criticized songs are produced in the places that are left underdeveloped, and they are about the hard living conditions and expectations of the people that are seemingly left there. Extremely talented rap artist, Wise Intelligent explains the situation:

There's one side of me that's totally for the preservation of black youth, because we're dying... The numbers of dying youth is increasing daily in our neighborhood. I live in the ghetto, the ghetto don't live in me. This is an ill situation, we have been put here for a cause. We have been put here to die. That's genocide man and that's the bottom line. (Rhyme and Reason, 1997)

It is not really ethical to speculate about the morals of the people who live life as a struggle and write songs about it. Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is also a former Black Panthers member, explains the motivations of rap artists on a podcast, which is presented in a rap album, accompanied with a beat:

The music arises from a generation that feels with some justice that they have been betrayed by those who came before them. That they are at best tolerated in schools, feared on the streets, and almost inevitably destined for the hellholes of prison. They grew up hungry, hated and unloved. And this is the psychic fuel that seems to generate the anger that seems endemic in much of the music and poetry. (Abu-Jamal, on Immortal Technique 2003)

If we go its roots, Hip Hop culture started with politically conscious groups -such as Afrika Bambaataa- and this consciousness was taken further by MCs like Immortal Technique and groups like dead prez. The very production process of Hip Hop music is based on free flow of information and sharing. A Jamaican born, DJ Cool Herc ripped and mixed the beats of the song called *Apache*, forming the beat structure of Hip Hop music in Bronx, in 1975 (Hebdige 2003 p.190). And immediately after the inclusion of the words, it has become a part of the black movement. There was a new medium to express black problems.

Before investigating the traces of the revolutionary political thought in rap music, I find it useful to summarize some milestones in black resistance history. I will focus on the events after the abolishment of slavery. After the Civil War (1861–1865), Abraham Lincoln abolished legal slavery by adding the Thirteenth Amendment to constitution in 1864¹. According to this article, slavery made illegal everywhere in

¹ <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/13thamendment.html> [accessed 20.06. 2018]

United States, but discrimination has not ended at that time or even now, as the widely participated #BlackLivesMatter movement, which was formed to protest the ever-continuing shootings of the unarmed black people by the police officers, demonstrated recently (Eligon 2015).

The most conscious, long termed and tough resistance of blacks against the white ideology has started –and still continuing- when Rosa Parks refused to give her seat to a white passenger on a public bus in 1955. She was not the first civilian to reject to give seat but her resistance has turned into a public transportation boycott and accepted as the beginning of the Black Movement (McGuire 2010, p.77-80). And Rosa Parks was awarded for her contribution to the nation and gained the title, “the mother of the freedom movement”.²

Sixties mark an era of social change almost in every aspect of life. It was the period when masses started to fight for rights, especially against issues like sexism and racism. Two black leaders have become extremely important in this period, whose influence is still existent today. The first one was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who was originally a reverend who has completed his PhD in theology. He has won a Nobel Peace Prize in 1964, because of his efforts to end discrimination in a pacifist way³. He believed that, “little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls (and walk together) as sisters and brothers” (King 1963). He never believed that the existing conflict could be solved with violence; he believed in peaceful unification of human race. In 1968, when Dr. King was at the peak of his popularity and influence, he was assassinated in Memphis.

Some scholars and activists claim that the ideas of Dr. King were comforting for the white people. He was a pacifist; there were no reason to get alarmed. He was a perfect representative for the house slave, according to Black Panthers Party (Abu-Jamal 2004, p.7-8). This description of slaves was stated by another black leader of the time, Malcolm X. According to him, there were two types of slaves: house and field slaves. The comfort of the house Negro was strongly related with the comfort of the master whereas the field Negro’s case was the opposite. For example, when the master got sick, the house slave prayed for his getting well whereas field slaves were praying for his death (Malcolm X 1965).

Malcolm X was indeed the opposite of Dr. King in many aspects. First of all, he refused ‘turning the other cheek’ teaching of the Bible completely. Instead he embraced the teachings of Nation of Islam, an African American political movement which keenly worked on the liberation of blacks from the white supremacy and taking them back to their motherland, Africa (Malcolm X 2015, p.xv). During his time as a minister in the Nation of Islam, he believed that the only solution for black freedom is Pan-Africanism, an intellectual movements focusing on the unification of the people of African descent (2015, p.357). Although his worldview softened in time, he always believed that a strong and armed black resistance is necessary on their way to freedom (Adams 2005, p.254-256).

² <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/PLAW-106publ26/content-detail.html> [accessed 20.06. 2018]

³ <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/1014.html> [accessed 20.06. 2018]

The idea of armed citizens' fighting for their rights is similar with Marx and Lenin's suggestion of forming armed masses instead of a state military. Thus the military costs, which exceed the necessary limits, will be reduced and the military will become a productive force instead of only a party of consumption. The army of workers will take place of the actual military in time. Also arming workers will accelerate their organization among themselves (Marx and Engels, 1848).

Although Malcolm X has always acted as an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, he has never told that he was a socialist, apart from one time when an interviewer asked him if he was a socialist: after asking if it is good for black people, Malcolm X said he is up for it (Cone 1991, p.284) He was assassinated in 1965 by three Nation of Islam members, in a time when he has separated his way from the organization and was preparing to welcome every race in his struggle for a better world (Breitman 1967).

The assassination did not slow down the fight for the freedom. As the unrest of the sixties continued, perhaps the most influential movement in black history on Hip Hop culture, the Black Panther Party is founded. The Party is found by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, in North Oakland. They have got their influence from Malcolm X.'s Pan Africanist ideals and teachings of Mao Tse-Tung (Abu-Jamal 2004, p.42). The Party was the first black organization to openly embrace socialism. They have prepared ten articles (Ten-Point Program) for its members and supporters to memorize (Canon 1970, p.9). They have formed an education program, which included weapons training and socialism. This education was core for all party members. Mao Tse-Tung has explained how a trained and armed individual can lead to a liberation army (Tse-Tung 1937).

The criticisms for blacks for embracing violence in their righteous cause have started in this era. The self-defined educated people were blaming black revolutionaries for being pro violence. A black revolutionary from the era, Angela Davis, has explained this pro-violence attitude of black people to a Swedish reporter in 1972, which was later used in 2011 documentary *Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*. She stated that the people who are against arming of the black masses have simply no idea what blacks are going through in USA. They have to learn how to protect themselves from endless oppressions of the state (2011).

Hip Hop culture has never been against weapons. As one of the greatest problems of the ghetto are gang wars as depicted in the documentary *Crips and Bloods: Made in USA* (2008). The crime rate among the black people is very high and, speculatively this crime rate is encouraged by the privileged. There are many references for this phenomenon in popular culture, such as the formulation of ghetto conditions by Furious Styles in famous movie *Boyz n the Hood* (1991): "*Why is it that there is a gun shop on almost every corner in this community? For the same reason that there is a liquor store on almost every corner in the black community. Why? They want us to kill ourselves.*" Yes, guns are significant phenomena in the lives of the underprivileged people of color in United States, as they are noticeable elements in rap songs that depict this lifestyle. Rappers frequently suggest using the guns, but many rappers suggest to use them against the system which has created ghetto, instead of using them on each other. In their 2004 album, *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta*, dead prez say "*If you gonna bang, then bang for change*". The same request is repeated in Immortal Technique's song, *Lick Shots* (2008): "*Shootin each other,*

shootin your brother / Aim the gun at the right motherfucker”

If we look back to the black freedom movement up to date, we see that no matter what background they are coming from, no matter what their political ideas or the solutions they are offering, all black leaders share one idea in common: the self-determination of black community, which also is the first article of Ten-Point Program of the Black Panthers. To accomplish anything, blacks had to control their own destinies. Unless they realize their own potential, they will remain oppressed.

In this point, I find it valuable to interpret the ideas of oppression stated by Marx and Engels. The existing mechanism creates a lifestyle for people, turning them into “bribed tools”. But to oppress a class, certain conditions must be assured to it under which it can, at least, continue its slavish existence [sic.]. As the industry advances, people fell under even those minimum conditions; they become paupers (Marx and Engels 1970, p.47). They live in unwanted places and get poor education, which consists of love for country, love for religion and love of service (Engels et al. 2002, p.46), formed by the ruling class.

Also with the arrival of industry, women labor has replaced men labor, because the work needed less force and also women’s wages are cheaper (Engels et al. 2002, p.64). This labor occupies women for long periods, thus they cannot find time to take care of their children. This leads a breaking in family ties. In this kind of neighborhoods, the pregnancy rates incredibly increases whereas the pregnancy age decreases. All kind of bad habits, including opium addiction and baby murders can easily be witnessed (Engels et al. 2002, p.157-158).

Drug addiction is also a significant problem in the lives of underprivileged black people and thus, a significant subject for rap songs. Scholar Joan Morgan informs us about a connection between the sexist attitude in some rap songs and drug culture (Morgan 1995, p.152). It is a frequent portrayal of a poor family in a ghetto with the father is either in prison or killed, mother is addicted and unemployed and the young boy of the family needs to take care of himself and his family (sibling maybe). This situation has been interpreted by many rap artists, from 2Pac (*Dear Mama* 1995) to Eminem (*Cleaning out my Closet* 2002). Revolutionary rapper Immortal Technique describes the early process to create a hardened gangster in his song, *Dance with the Devil*:

*Nigga never had a father and his mom was a (fiend)
She put the pipe down, but for every year she was sober
Her son’s heart simultaneously grew colder. (2001a)*

To change this situation, reforms in education and social life are necessary. But the first step is becoming self-determinant. Marx and Engels lists the steps to be taken as, formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat (1970, p.47-48). dead prez calls all blacks to take action:

*But see I got my niggas
And we gonna organize a people army*

*And we gonna get control over our own lives
And I mean that shit right there from the bottom of my shit (2000)*

A similar call comes from Public Enemy:

*Gotta give us what we need
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death
We got to fight the powers that be
Lemme hear you say
Fight the power (1990)*

The third article of the Ten-Point Program of the Black Panthers was originally “We want an end to the robbery by the white men of our black community” but the term *white men* was changed to *Capitalists* in a short time (Abu-Jamal 2004, p.98). This also marks a shift in black resistance. With the Black Panthers, the class struggle was introduced in the black liberation movement for the first time. This also shows the Marxist tradition was embraced by the party, as The Communist Manifesto begins with defining every *history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles*. No matter where and when, no matter the skin color, there are only the oppressors and the oppressed. The advancements in society did not change this fact; only changed the classes. For example the slave has become proletarian, but it was still being oppressed, not by the landlord but the bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels 1970, p.31).

This class-consciousness has found its place also in Hip Hop culture. Hip Hop artist Immortal Technique uses this phenomenon in couple of his songs. In his 2008 song, *That's What it is*, he uses a sample from the Bill Duke's 1992 film *Deep Cover*, saying: “I think you know that there's no such thing as an American anymore. No Hispanics, no Japanese, no blacks, no whites, no nothing. It's just rich people and poor people.” (2008)

In another song called *Poverty of Philosophy*, Immortal Technique explains the class struggle even better:

In fact, I have more in common with most working and middle-class white people than I do with most rich black and Latino people. As much as racism bleeds America, we need to understand that classism is the real issue. Many of us are in the same boat and it's sinking, while these bougie Mother-Fuckers ride on a luxury liner, and as long as we keep fighting over kicking people out of the little boat we're all in, we're gonna miss an opportunity to gain a better standard of living as a whole. (2001)

This song also criticizes the attitude of some blacks claiming to fight the power, but located in the center of the system. The problem is not interpreting the system but actually changing it. This is really similar with Karl Marx's criticism on philosophers who takes absolutely no action to change the system; they just sit in front of their desks and tell people what needs to be done (Marx and Engels 1998, p.574). Immortal Technique blames the able black folks who refuse to take action for being “*coffee shop niggers*” in the same song.

Another article of the Ten-Point Program was “*We want all black men to be exempt from military service*”. Stating that they are not willing to kill colored-men all around the world for a racist government, the Panthers wanted all blacks expelled from the army to form a self-sufficient community. This situation was questioned before by black activists such as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, Malcolm X. and Dr. King (Derrick 2005, p. 233). Also before their freedom, the military service and war was among the greatest problems faced by the black community. The most interesting resistance happened during the Independence War. Five thousand blacks were enlisted in the army led by General George Washington, who happens to be a slave owner. But another 65 thousand blacks have decided to abandon their masters and fight with the English Army. When the English side has lost, blacks decided to depart with them instead of staying in America (Abu-Jamal 2004, p.16-17).

In Panthers’ case, they have gone as far as writing a letter, which suggested to help Vietnamese army in their fight with America. While these were happening, the black ghettos were –and still are- the most fertile grounds for army recruitment. In that era, United States was going through a high inflation period. The industries that have been formed were being moved to third world countries, leaving most of the population unemployed (Abu-Jamal 2004, p.125).

From this point we arrive to the same situation described by Engels: The unemployed masses form a backup worker supply to use when necessary. During good times nobody would care if those people are alive or in prison and the competition of those potential workers will keep the labor prices low (Engels et al. 2002, p.56-57). This labor is the military service for the ghettos. As Lenin describes, war is an imperialistic phenomenon, which is caused by the ruling classes’ battle for the colonies. And the “defending the nation” slogan, which is imposed is only a trap made by bourgeoisie and opportunists to fool the proletariat to give their life willingly for the ruling class’ benefits (Engels et al. 2002, p.143).

If we consider the standards in black ghettos, U.S. has done a great job turning those places into labor industries, as it is frequently demonstrated in various media, such as John Singleton’s 1991 film, *Boyz n the Hood*: The ghetto is designed to leave black people very few options. On every corner there is one liquor shop and one weapon shop. The authorities are constantly watching but are reluctant to prevent. Of course, kids living under those circumstances were not being educated properly. Even the bright students face segregation because of their lifestyles. I am not talking about the gang members at this point. In the movie one of the brightest kids was being refused a college education because he was a father. So the best way to earn a living for a black boy with a baby child becomes enlistment.

There are many reactions against war and its industry in Hip Hop culture. In 1984, Hip Hop artist Afrika Bambaataa has joined powers with Johnny Lyndon of legendary punk rock band Sex Pistols and made a song called *World Destruction*. In the song, they repeat the time for world destruction is coming closer because of the fascist, chauvinistic government fools [sic.] who just want to get richer. More recently, in 2004, white Hip Hop artist Eminem made a song to criticize USA’s involvement in Iraq, called *Mosh*. In the song he suggests people of all colors to join forces to overcome Bush administration and bring all fighting Americans back home. He even

has a strategy for this:

*Let the president answer a higher anarchy
Strap him with an Ak-47, let him go, fight his own war
Let him impress daddy that way
No more blood for oil, we got our own battles to fight on our own soil
No more psychological warfare, to trick us to thinking that we ain't loyal*

Another use for the unemployed takes place in prisons. In USA, the prison system forces inmates to join production in prisons. This system is called Prison Industrial Complex. In this system, prisoners work in assembly lines and produce items like license plates. More than 70% of inmates are people of color in United States and the prison population is constantly growing. Instead of taking the necessary steps, such as social reforms, the government has chosen to profit from this situation as well (Davis 1998).

Naturally, this situation is criticized almost by every Hip Hop artist from the beginning. In Public Enemy's 1988 song *Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos*, a young man who refuses to enlist gets imprisoned. The situation is described as:

*You have to realize - what it's a form of slavery
Organized under a swarm of devils
Straight up - word'em up on the level.*

Mos Def also targets the prison industry in his song called *Mathematics*:

*Bubblin crack, jewel theft and robbery to combat poverty
and end up in the global jail economy
Stiffer stipulations attached to each sentence
Budget cutbacks but increased police presence (1999)*

The Black Panthers Party dissolved in 1982. But, in the light of the given –and limited- examples that I have presented, I strongly reject the idea that there is a discontinuity between black freedom movements and Hip Hop culture. The things that have changed are only the language and the presentation of the ideas. The Hip Hop generation is perfectly aware of what is going on and will continue to fight for their beliefs, which are inherited from former generations. Beyoncé's extremely feminist homage to Black Panthers in Super Bowl 50 (Elgot 2016) or Kendrick Lamar's 2016 Grammy performance, which blended the African roots with modern problems (Klein 2016) are among many examples that prove the awareness of Hip Hop artists. I would like to conclude this paper with Talib Kweli's *Name of the Game*:

*Persistence, dedication
Consistent, motivation, resistance to stagnation
of information, distribute it free to the entire population
No hesitation, makin' it public
No privatization from corporations
Today in order to be sane you gotta go crazy
so remain on top of the game (2000)*

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