

The Problem with Hip Hop

Patriarchy, Proletarians and Revolutionary Culture

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Punk rock was the first style of music that really meant anything to me. That's not really true, I was into grunge and radio rap for a while, but punk was the first musical culture that I felt any real affinity with. After all, punk was what led me to anarchism, and then to class consciousness. Around the same time that I was getting into anarchism, I was also playing in bands, setting up shows, and tabling with anti-war, crimethink, and animal rights literature at local concerts. By the time I was 18, being an anarchist within punk rock was what I considered to be the best way to get towards a freer world. I felt that the punk scene represented what could be the 'revolutionary agent' within society. I reasoned that this group of kids united by a love of a musical style could become radicalized, they then could go out and "do stuff." I received a rude awakening from this hypothesis when the band I was in was invited to play with some pretty big bands like Phobia and Resist & Exist in LA and San Diego for a series of benefits for the anarcho-punk publication, *Profane Existence*. LA is a hot bed for anarcho-punk and crust bands. There, I watched probably a thousand kids singing along, surrounded by anarchist banners, and literature tables. Yet, despite the sea of people who were "down," a ragged collection of a million "Support the ALF" patches, and hundreds who chanted along with the lyrics, I realized how empty all of this was.

People here were united in an aesthetic and for the enjoyment of a musical style. It was also telling to me that the people I met in the various activist groups and at places like the Che Cafe (a radical space and infoshop) largely came from outside of punk and often did not dress the part. As I became older and more involved in community based action, I discovered that people were motivated to take action against Capital based on the conditions that were imposed upon them by class society. Slowly, as I came to class consciousness, and I grew to see that in punk, not only was class largely not discussed; there was a lack of looking at one's relationship in class society. Meaning that if you put on an Aus-Rotten record you might get schooled on what the US was doing in Columbia, but you're weren't going to hear about the singer's work and why it sucked. Punks largely didn't talk about being without money or working – perhaps this was because of the class composition of punks, or perhaps it was just because of the cultural tradition of many anarcho-punk bands. As I became older, I was introduced to other forms of music that I was not before; namely hip hop, largely through the leftist political rap group, Dead Prez. Soon, I was listening to more political hip hop than I was political punk rock, and now, I listen to mostly non-'political' hip hop.

At this point in my life, **I find hip hop to be the most class conscious form of music.** By this I mean hip hop is the most clear musical style that articulates the singer's relationship to the commodity while at the same time expressing their struggle within that relation. The narrative that is found in hip hop is something that I think all proletarians can appreciate and find resonance with, even if the image of the street hustler or an up and coming gangsta is far from your present reality. The idea that one can only beat the material conditions that are imposed upon our lives by taking risks, breaking the law, through the action of close and trusted friends (thus making the police, feds, and snitches enemies), and not hesitating to use violence to achieve such ends, is a fine narrative indeed. Because so much of hip hop is about the reality of life within poverty, ghettos, and being forced into certain situations (drugs, prisons, police brutality), it can act as a vehicle for creating class consciousness. When people understand what they go through is not their fault, but the product of a system that, in fact benefits from exploitation, then they can make a better analysis of the current system and their place within it. The problem with hip hop however, is that much of it has created what I would refer to as a 'false class consciousness,' that has nothing to do with abolishing our present conditions and everything about class ascension. Meaning, the goal is not to abolish class, but to rise up from the bottom and get the fuck out.

Much of the substance of **hip hop is also problematic: black market capitalism, prole on prole violence, and rampant sexism.** Patriarchy is perhaps the most problematic aspect of this, and one of the biggest barriers holding hip hop back from being a truly class conscious form of music. This happens for several reasons, and probably the largest driving force is, of course, the music industry that demands that rappers keep turning out hits about empty sex and booty jams. But beyond that, the narrative of most hip hop starts off firstly with that of the individual; that individual largely always being a young male, as opposed to being any young proletarian or the collective body that is the class. This young male, in his attempt to appropriate material conditions (often through criminal means), also often sees female bodies as objects that he wants to appropriate. Thus, women, like money, cars, jewels, etc, become commodities to be accumulated for the purpose of consumption. In fact, women are often seen not only as commodities, but as commodities that require the buying of even more commodities. Thus, hit after hit about buying women various objects for the purpose of acquiring them, or talking about how other males are broke, and thus less admirable suitors towards various female bodied people continues to be pumped out. It is no surprise that these songs are hits, as they reinforce the values of the culture and help to reinforce racial stereotypes of young men of color. Thus, as female bodied people are commodified into objects just like cars or jewels, it becomes necessary for them to be demonized or spoken of simply as "bitches" and "hoes." This is done for the sake of writing them and their agency off; thus justifying their position as commodities. Since much of hip hop has written off a whole section of the class, it thus cannot truly be a vehicle for class consciousness, and thus cannot be revolutionary. There are several artists out there who attempt to fight this (for instance the Coup, "Pimps down, hoes up!") or 2pac (who although in some songs states that he is pro-choice and pro-woman, then goes on to state things like MOB, or Money over Bitches). This further plays itself off in hip hop culture, such as in the video, or on stage, or just in the sheer lack of female emcees singing and performing. In one of the latest Young Jeezy videos, "Put On," which includes references to the economic recession and housing foreclosure, and is an all together pretty class conscious video. The video is then shot to shit when Jeezy comes out flanked by three women who do nothing but dance around him in a provocative manner. Hip hop not only often lacks women's voices, it silences them. By denying women the opportunity

to talk about their relationship to not only class society, but also their lives within the patriarchy, hip hop in essence further strengthens those systems of domination. Until hip hop sees women as active players in their own lives, able to articulate their own needs and desires not only as people but also as fellow proletarians, it will not be fully class conscious.

Hip hop is also further problematic, because it shapes and influences so much of proletarian and youth culture. Modern hip hop, while often antagonistic towards the police and aspects of the power structure, it does not question the nature of wage labor and commodity production. Since the late 60's and 1970's, the various nationalist and liberation movements that sought to organize and liberate the internal colonies in the ghettos and barrios of the United States were crushed by the US government. In the place of these groups and political parties such as the Black Panthers, self-defense crews formed into gangs. Political revolutionaries turned instead to drug trafficking. What was first seen as a movement to liberate communities, instead the focus became much more individualistic and concerned only for itself. Modern hip hop is a product of this class decomposition. The drive to accumulate material conditions and 'fuck everyone else,' shows this clearly. The influence of the drug game that has grown since the 1970's and has thus influenced hip hop has spread to every t-shirt, car sticker, and rap album in the English speaking world. With the dreams of the 60's crushed and nothing new to take its place, this new 'false consciousness' now parades around, offering no real opposition to Capital. While it may claim to be against snitches and the police, as long as this is only for the purpose of protecting the power and markets of the drug trade, then it will only be the musical voice of underground capitalism.

At a time of great crisis, we do need proletarian cultural forms like hip hop. While I have talked a lot of shit about it, truth be told, give a poor person a mic, and they'll in the end give you something good, at least part of the time. Still, **for hip hop to be a way to explain actual conditions and thus create class consciousness on a mass scale, it will have to leave behind much of what has been a part of hip hop culture for so long in the past. It must come to terms and destroy its patriarchal language, themes, and ways of presenting itself. It must bring female bodied people into the picture and allow them to talk about their lives as proletarians on even footing. It must turn away from being an individualistic movement, and instead focus on destroying the things which create poverty in the first place.**

Many new class conscious and anarchist hip hop projects exist here in the US and in Europe, and for me are very exciting. Emcee Lynx, Drowning Dog, DJ Maletesta, Kenny Arkana, Loop-troop, and Sherman Austin are all creating great hip hop music that is both revolutionary, class conscious, and also banging. Hopefully this continues and artists like this will become bigger and more popular within the class. Please, let the beat drop.

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