

YOUTH CULTURE, HIP HOP & RESISTANCE TOWARD CAPITAL & GLOBALIZATION: FORGING A 21ST CENTURY REVOLUTIONARY CULTURAL MOVEMENT

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Brought me here and worked me like an animal. Built the political economy off my stolen labor. Made them rich. Made me poor. (Dead Prez/Police State)

1. During the 20th and now 21st centuries, North American musicians from Gil Scott Heron to Afrika Bambaata, Woody Guthrie to Ani DiFranco, Ludlow to Ajogún and Public Enemy to Rage Against the Machine, have been at the forefront in creating a music and a politics, an auditory imaginary, a revolutionary musical praxis, to stand, confront and challenge capital and empire and their multifarious forms of social and economic oppression. As we wade deeper into the 21st century and continue bear witness to, and confront, the ever increasing vile net and global entrenchment of neo—liberalism and globalization (from the oil wars to the occupation and domination of Palestine to the children forced to sell their labor power in Maquiladoras), we argue here that anti—capitalist revolutionaries of every type should consider the true and anti—hegemonic potential of this aural cultural struggle. Why? Because this notion, especially within the contexts of the revolutionary imperative, needs further discussion and action; especially when we are attempting to develop solidarity, political awareness and activist consciousness amongst youth.

2. During the late 1990s many working class people along with environmentalists, educators, youth and community activists came together to resist the neo—liberal policies that have created a type of globalization that has exploited developing countries and eradicated the environmental and labor laws countries have implemented. For example, more than fifty thousand people helped in shutting down the WTO (World Trade Organization) meetings and upheld the voices of working and oppressed people all over the world. The organizers and participants in these protests (both adults and youth) were labeled by the capitalist press as destructive and misguided; as “anarchists” who sought only lawlessness destruction, chaos and bedlam. This sounds to us more like what the US has been seeking and fostering in Afghanistan, Iraq and South Central Los Angeles (both recently and over decades). We suggest that those who accused the WTO protesters of such motivations and ideology consider putting Goldman (1917) and Meltzer (1996) on their summer reading lists, for these hacks—for—capital obviously lack even basic understandings of the rich and important theoretical and political tradition of anarchy (let alone the even more far reaching socialism or Marxism).

3. More recently, in 2002, dock workers who were unionized within the I.L.W.U (International Longshore and Warehouse Union) in the Bay area of Northern California were also demonized by mainstream media and confronted by the Bush Administration. The argument proposed by the media was based on profits and consumerism rather than viewing the struggle as a fight for better wages, safer working conditions and a say in how technology would be implemented. These workers were framed as “unpatriotic” and

unsympathetic to the already ailing economy (their actions were even dubbed by some as akin to economic “terrorism”). Tom Ridge, the head of newly mandated federal Homeland Security, told the I.L.W.U. that the Bush administration would not tolerate any strike and would implement the Taft—Hartley Act to force workers back to their jobs for 90 days. This would not only dismantle the bargaining power of the union, but would set a precedence that the Bush administration would not tolerate right for workers to organize (Labor Notes, Sept. 2002).

4. Although the capitalist media portrayed these protests as “riots” and “destructive”—and the youthful and adult protesters themselves as “anarchists” and “anti—patriots”—many youth organizers associated with these anti—globalization and pro—labor political movements have created independent media outlets that have been able to counter these mainstream labels and perceptions. For—profit media tried to convince the world that youth were violent and destructive by giving the corporate viewership snapshots of young people throwing bricks through Starbucks and other corporate chains. (Throwing a brick through the window of an empty coffee house that does not offer its workers health benefits is wrong, but dropping a 500 pound bomb on a water treatment plant in Iraq is not?) One of the main questions that the commercial media did not pose was, “Why are these young people doing this?” If that question were asked—and then answered by the youth themselves—corporate television viewers would have had a very different understanding of the message that this group of *juventud* trying to portray indeed. In an article written in the *Canadian Dimension* (2002), Joel Harden stated:

The real question is how youth activism can be mobilized into an unstoppable force to change society... Through their involvement, they can provide an agitational force to inspire millions to act for progressive change. The images of trade unionists and young radicals in recent mass protests led many to claim an important alliance had begun between youth activists and organized labour.

5. This, in contrast to the movement by both the mainstream media and neo—conservatives to dis—empower youth, demonstrates the ability for young people to organize politically as well as create their own understandings of how capitalism and the movement towards globalization are naturally oppressive. In fact, the youth that were throwing rocks through the window of the home of the “caramel macchiato”¹ knew both politically and strategically why they were engaging in corporate property destruction. If the mainstream media thought of these youth as “vandals” and “deviant” then we should wonder why *Time Magazine* (1999) decided to write a full article that encompassed a dual spread on the non—hierarchal structure that these young people were organizing under? This demonstrates that youth are building and representing both transformative spaces that resist mainstream notions that youth are politically disinterested, lackadaisical, violent and in need of discipline. Henry Giroux (1999) in his article from *Z Magazine*, entitled, *Youth Panic and the Politics of Schooling: The Corporate Model of Teaching Needs to be Changed* demonstrated that youth are being punished by both the neo—conservatives as well as the liberals, especially in the post—Columbine, capitalist, United States:

Youth are no longer at risk but considered the risk. This perception of youth serves to largely eradicate any notion of productive agency among young people, offering few

¹ For a fun time, direct you web browser to <http://www.ihatestarbucks.com/> or <http://www.buttafly.com/starbucks/index.php>.

possibilities for analyzing how children actually experience and mediate relationships between themselves and other children as well as adult society.

6. Working class cultures, especially within urban areas, have been forced to utilize and liberate tools in order to fight off the oppressive nature of capitalism. Whether it is creating transformative spaces for artistic expression or developing spaces where youth are organizing politically outside of the dead arena of capitalist politics, organizers against capitalism are needed to help solidify these spaces of resistance.

7. In this essay we argue that in order to form a more inclusive movement towards socialism, the adult working class needs to develop international campaigns of solidarity with youth that are organizing politically against capitalism. In order to achieve this, adult working class people need to recognize youth as equally able to organize politically and move away from the notion that youth are unable to recognize their own agency. Recognizing that youth are an important element in fighting capitalism can only forge a larger movement that incorporates and envisions not only workers, but the daughters and sons of society, that are willing to put themselves on the line against oppression.

PUTTING VOICE TO URBAN WORKING CLASSNESS & YOUTH: HIP HOP, “GANGSTAS” & REVOLUTION

8. Hip—Hop has predominantly been developed by African Americans in urban centers. Its economic success has become a multi—billion dollar industry where corporations have co—opted its culture into a consumer product. Unfortunately criticisms by both the conservatives and liberals have left Hip—Hop and Gangsta Rap being viewed as deviant behavior. To counter this popular viewpoint, especially within working class and urban centers, we, as organizers must understand the historical roots of Hip—Hop. Cornell West (1983) writes in his article entitled, *On Afro—American Music: From Bebop to Rap*
African American music is first and foremost, though not exclusively or universally, a countercultural practice with deep roots in modes of religious transcendence and political opposition. Therefore it is seductive to rootless and alienated young people disenchanted with existential meaningless, disgusted, with flaccid bodies and dissatisfied with the status quo. (p. 474)

9. To demonstrate the urgency of building solidarity amongst youth culture (Hip—Hop) and working class people it is imperative to also view the concrete organizing that many youth have conducted in creating spaces of resistance. *Black August* which has been a Hip—Hop concert in cooperation with the Hip—Hop festival in Cuba connects not only the politics of resistance within youth culture, but presents a more inclusive narrative that the dominant culture consistently denies. The concert concluded two gatherings that committed not only their proceeds, but their organizing efforts to promote activists and revolutionaries who have either lost their lives or have been imprisoned for battling the systematic oppression of their political work. Another way youth are organizing based on their own representation has been through conferences. In January of 2004 youth from around the world came to a conference in India to represent themselves at the World Social Conference where youth had an...

...open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, form proposals, free exchange of experiences for strengthening alliances between social movements that are opposed to neo—liberalism and to domination of the world by capital.²

² See <http://www.wsfindia.org/youthforum/culture1.php>.

10. We believe that youth need to represent themselves on a global level to ensure their needs are being met. This is especially important when we are seeing more youth working under oppressive working conditions at younger ages. Globalization has forced families to have their children work unconscionable amount of hours and under extreme conditions in order to survive. Not only were these important issues confronted through dialogue and proposals, but were presented in a way that youth felt represented their voices. The use of art, poetry, music, theatre and many other strategies were all a part of how youth represented themselves. Many of the pieces that were incorporated into the presentations used elements of the Hip—Hop culture including; graffiti, street theatre, and dances.

THE YOUTH ARE GETTING RESTLESS: YOUTH VOICES & CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS

11. While speaking of youth in general it is important to focus more specifically on how youth are receiving and creating their notions of self. New York Hip Hop artist Mos Def confronts the question, “Where is Hip—Hop going?” His response is simple, “Where ever we (the Hip—Hop community) are going!” We mention this because of its important connection to asking a similar question, “Where are we going as oppressed working people?” The question is complex but should be grounded in Mos Def’s philosophy, “Where ever we (oppressed working people) are going!” We make this connection with Hip—Hop because of its elements of resistance as well as its overt relationship to capital.

12. Hip—Hop, especially in the United States, is somewhat of a dichotomy, but extremely important when discussing a struggle towards a comprehensive social movement and the unseating of capital. We state this as a dichotomy because this resistance has been developed within the capitalist structure. Although corporations have attempted to place Hip—Hop within its advertisements and consumer culture, it has also been viewed as a counter—hegemonic reaction towards the system it financially supports. This counter—hegemonic work of Hip—Hop is why, within the dominant culture, Hip—Hop is viewed as a threat to social norms. This is where we, as progressive/socialist organizers, and denouncers of capital, need to welcome these counter—cultural elements that are developing within these systems of oppression. Zack de la Rocha wrote in the Rage Against the Machine song, *Down Rodeo*, “Fuck the G—Rides. I want the machines that are making them.” This denouncement of consumer capitalism that MTV Hip—Hop or mainstream Hip—Hop so adamantly appropriates into its programming is one element of resistance that young people are listening and incorporating into their lives. Last Emperor, who is a rapper from the US east coast, incorporates elements of socialism into his lyrical presentation stating, “I didn’t mean to do it, socialism just came naturally.” If these artists are using their lyrical content to counter the dominant culture’s narrative of blind consumerism, then advocates and organizers of class struggle need to forge alliances with these artists in order to build a more solidified movement between youth, artists and community organizers. It is also important to distinguish that within the 21st century, the working class should not be classified as homogenous, but as a diverse class with a similar relationships to capital. Dave Hill, Mike Sanders and Ted Hankin, articulate this idea further by stating:

It is necessary to find ways of articulating and representing a class analysis as part of the process of rebuilding class consciousness. This form of class consciousness must recognize practically and theoretically the heterogeneous nature of the working class, as well as its common experience — of being in exploited wage labor. (p. 174)

13. We also mention this connection because of the need for working people to understand and build solidarity surrounding cultural resistance; which is being fostered predominantly by racially diverse youth throughout our communities. Youth culture, and within this essay, Hip—Hop, has helped in not only generating lyrical content that confronts global capital, but is building pockets of cooperative elements that resist corporate and hierarchical structures. Within the structure of bureaucracies and neo—liberal ideology, many conservative and liberal notions of social change are co—opted into struggles of competitive capitalism and patronizing reforms rather than the notions of a Marxist struggle between capitalists and oppressed people.

14. In summation and conclusion, we believe that adult revolutionaries need to seek—out, recognize and foster these nascent pockets of cooperative socialist—oriented cultural/musical resistance among youth (especially those pockets represented and fostered by the politically—oriented Hip Hop music that is so popular among North American youngsters across lines of ethnicity, gender and class). Not only can and should we nurture these pockets, we can and should learn *from* them (in the true Freirean [1970] “teacher/student”—“student/teacher” spirit!); and, hopefully, include them in the larger global, counter—hegemonic, multi—sphered, epic, necessary, inevitable, unstoppable and winnable struggle against capital and its dehumanizing nature.

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