

## Microphone Commandos: Rap Music and Political Philosophy

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A number of commentators on hip-hop culture have noted that rap has important political dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Philosopher Tommy Lott, for example, has argued that, despite the widely held view among older, middle-class folk that rap is noise emanating from wild, young blacks, there is an element of cultural resistance in rap music.<sup>2</sup> Many black youths realize that they are trapped under American apartheid and have used rap as a way to resist the racial assault on their physical and mental well-being in particular and on the black community in general. In keeping with this idea, I will show that some rap music, if one listens closely, can be heard as challenging basic philosophical assumptions underlying the political order. In particular, some rap represents a fundamental challenge to liberal political philosophy.

In some hip-hop music we hear a call for blacks to reassess what it means to be an American citizen. By questioning the fundamental relationship between blacks and the state, this form

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<sup>1</sup> Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Houston A. Baker Jr., *Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); William Eric Perkins, ed., *Droppin' Science: Critical Essays on Rap Music and Hip-Hop Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); Theresa A. Martinez, "Popular Culture as Oppositional Culture: Rap As Resistance," *Sociological Perspectives* 40 (1997), pp. 269–291; Alan Light, ed., *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1999); and Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

of rap expresses a political philosophy of its own. In exploring this theme, I want to use the concept of the social contract as a philosophical backdrop, because the idea that the relationship between citizen and state is one of a contract has a long history in political philosophy. The social contract is thought to be a real or hypothetical agreement between free and autonomous individuals who come together to form a civil state. The state provides protection of one's life and property and affords individuals the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing; and citizens reciprocate by obeying the law and pledging their allegiance to the state. The state retains its moral authority as long as it fulfills its part of the contract. When the state fails to live up to its part of the contract, the contract is void and individuals are then free to protect themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Certain rap songs suggest that the social contract between blacks and the United States, if any ever existed, has been broken. This view has at least two important ramifications. First, it gives rise to the view that in the United States it's every person for himself or herself. In a country that puts so much emphasis on material possessions, without a strong positive relationship between marginalized people and the government, it can easily become "all about the Benjamins," as P Diddy says.<sup>4</sup>

Second, and most important for this track, some members of the hip-hop community know that the civil rights struggle for African Americans continues, though often in subtle ways. America has not lived up to its promise of full inclusion for all citizens, especially African Americans. Members of the hip-hop nation have an obligation to continue the struggle for the hearts and minds of the youth against what the philosopher Cornel West calls nihilism—"the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness."<sup>5</sup> Thus it is the role of conscious members of the hip-hop community to critique the proponents of material-

<sup>2</sup> Tommy Lott, 1992. "Marooned in America: Black Urban Youth Culture and Social Pathology," in Bill E. Lawson, ed., *The Underclass Question* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 71-89.

<sup>3</sup> See Bill E. Lawson, "Crime, Minorities, and the Social Contract," *Criminal Justice Ethics* 9 (1990).

<sup>4</sup> Puff Daddy, *No Way Out* (Bad Boy, 1997)

<sup>5</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 22-23.

ism and misogyny both in the hip-hop community and America more generally. Let's turn now to how this position calls into question the social contract between the U.S. government and African Americans.

### The Social Contract

The book that has had the greatest impact on American political philosophy is John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* (1690). Locke argues that governments are established to protect the property rights of individuals. We should note that he has an expansive conception of "property," which includes one's body, life, liberty, and possessions. The role of the state is to protect our "property rights" in this broad sense. This protection can either be from outside invaders or from unsavory characters within the state.

According to Locke, prior to the establishment of government (a pre-political condition he calls the "state of nature"), not all were equally suited or equipped to defend their property claims against others. Some civil mechanism was needed to adjudicate property claims. Thus, free and equal individuals came together to form a compact in which they agreed to give up to the state certain rights they possessed as a matter of natural right. These rights included the right to be their own judge, jury, and executioner. By freely consenting to join with others in civil society, each is politically obligated to obey the dictates of the state.

The state is to ensure protection of their property by providing known laws, impartial judges, and swift and certain punishment for property violations. Individuals should then be able to live peaceful and secure lives with the knowledge that their property rights will be respected and protected. In this manner their chances of a life free of the inconveniences of the "state of nature" are ensured. The state then provides the social environment in which individuals have the right to decide how to order their lives.

### Hip-Hop Culture and Human Freedom

Important in discussions of the social contract is the principle of respect for personal autonomy. The liberal tradition in political

philosophy rests on a moral commitment to individual freedom. It tries to give people the room to frame their own plans of life, develop their own talents, and act on their own preferences with as little external interference as possible. In short, liberalism tries to give individuals the space to be their own masters, to rule themselves as far as they are able.<sup>6</sup>

Hip-hop culture has been deeply impacted by the part of liberal social contract theory that emphasizes human freedom. It should not be surprising that young blacks would be drawn to this aspect of liberalism, as it was at the heart of the Civil Rights Movement. African Americans wanted to be able to express their individual autonomy unfettered by racism. Accordingly, the freedom to express individuality is an important aspect of hip-hop culture. This freedom means that one will likely find all sorts of ideologies expounded as part of hip-hop culture, many and sometimes conflicting views of what it is to be part of the hip-hop community.

I believe that those persons who claim to be part of hip-hop culture have the right to self-identify. Thus, there are many differing segments of hip-hop culture. This is why any attempt to view any one segment of the culture as defining the culture is generally regarded as not understanding the culture. Persons who look at the materialism often think that "the Benjamins" or the bling is all hip hop is about. Persons close to the culture will tell you that materialism is one view held by some in the community, but it does not define the culture. I want to focus on those members of the community who see hip-hop culture as a means to engender social change.

Early on there were rap artists who understood that the supposed principles of respect for individuals did not seem to apply to blacks. Black people, for all of their civil rights struggles, still had not overcome. The ideology of individual freedom still seemed like a distant goal. Many of the mainstream social leaders talked as if the "dream" had been realized, while for many urban blacks their life prospects seemed dim. Certain members of hip-hop culture expressed their dissatisfaction with the apparent hypocrisy of American culture. Such dissatisfaction is

<sup>6</sup> David Carroll Cochran, *The Color of Freedom: Race and Contemporary American Liberalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), p. 6.

expressed in Grandmaster Flash's "The Message," 2Pac's "Trapped" (*2Pacalypse Now*), PE's "911 Is a Joke" (*Fear of a Black Planet*), Ras Kass's "The Nature of the Threat" (*Soul on Ice*), Kam's "Stereotype" (*Neva Again*), and many other songs or raps that speak to the racism, classism, and jingoism of the United States. Many rappers see hip hop as an oppositional culture. In particular, the treatment of blacks in the United States has led some socially conscious members of the hip-hop community to question the meaning of citizenship for the African in America. This segment of hip-hop culture often claims that black Americans do not have even formal freedom. Should Blacks question the value of their citizenship?

### The Idea of Citizenship

In the Lockean view of the state, autonomous persons are citizens in the full sense of the word. They identify with the state and see the state as the focal point of their social existence. Generally, citizenship is understood in a very broad sense to mark the status of an individual in an organized state with territorial sovereignty. The status of citizen provides us with a guide for the rights and responsibilities of the individual in such a state. Citizenship means being a full and equal member of a state, native or naturalized, who has responsibilities to the government of the state and who is entitled to certain protection and rights within it.

There are two important components of citizenship—the social and the political-legal. The social component suggests that one is a member of a specific political community. Citizenship encompasses a feeling of being a vital part of the state; it gives an individual a social reference point to gauge his or her place in history, world geography, and our global society. The individual feels that his or her actions are part of the history and development of the state and therefore feels loyalty to it. Citizenship is therefore a crucial aspect of an individual's identity. In rap music, we find challenges to the widely held belief that blacks are full citizens. These challenges can be seen in songs that assert that blacks are Africans first and foremost. We find this view articulated in the music of groups such as X-Clan (*To the East Blackwards*), Brand Nubian (*One for All*), and, more recently, Dead Prez: "I'm an African, never

### **“Who Protects Us from You?” The Police and Protection**

As noted, one of the basic reasons for joining the state, according to social contract theory, is physical protection. But many rappers assert that the racist behavior of law enforcement officers clearly shows how the state has failed to protect blacks. In many urban areas, the residents believe that the efforts of the police are ineffective in protecting them from crime. These citizens complain that the police respond late or not at all to calls for assistance. As Public Enemy states bluntly, “911 is a joke.” Many living in the inner city think that they are victims twice over. First, they have to contend with crime in their communities, and then they have to contend with lack of protection from the state coupled with police brutality when they try to protect themselves.

In Los Angeles, for example, the Nation of Islam has been active in the battle against drugs in black communities. Members of the Muslim group, who patrol communities unarmed, have had run-ins with the police. One such account of an altercation between thirteen young Muslims and twenty-four Los Angeles police officers is indicative of the problem:

Although accounts differ, Nation of Islam spokesmen say the Muslims objected to being ordered to assume a prone position on the ground. “Why do you want us to bow down to you—bow in the streets, face down as though you were God?” a Farrakhan aide, Khallid Muhammad, said later. “You don’t make the white folks of Beverly Hills bow down . . . We bow down to God and God alone.” All thirteen of the Muslims were charged in the episode, and the controversy fueled mounting tensions in predominantly black south-central Los Angeles over what many residents see as harassment and the overuse of force by city police and sheriff’s deputies.<sup>11</sup>

The actions of the state are crucial in residents’ decisions about whether to regard their acts of self-protection as merely supplemental to police protection, or as replacing the police. The residents of this community believed they were justified in having patrols, because the police had abrogated their role as

protectors. The political powers in many cities do admit that such patrols are necessary but nevertheless regard them as unjustified. However, when the state fails to allow citizens to protect their lives and property through what they regard as legally permissible actions, they will naturally doubt that the state takes their welfare seriously and they will tend to withdraw their allegiance to their government.<sup>12</sup>

In America, we consider sanctions in criminal law to be deterrents and look upon law enforcement agencies as protective agencies. I believe that the purpose of a legal system is to ensure that an individual may go peacefully about his or her business without coercive interference, which many African Americans living in urban areas cannot do. Blacks live in fear based on personal victimization or the victimization of friends, neighbors, or relatives. It’s the same fear that has caused the residents of these areas to turn their houses into prisons in which they attempt to lock themselves in from crime. The majority of these citizens are not criminals, yet they find themselves often at the mercy of the criminal element. Members of these black communities cannot feel that the state is protecting them.

One might object that the problem is not too little police presence in black neighborhoods, but too much. The extraordinarily high arrest frequency and high incarceration rates of young, urban black men and women, coupled with anxiety about police brutality and racial profiling against blacks, suggest that law enforcement agents have great presence in black urban neighborhoods. Yet many urban residents think that the police are there to contain rather than to protect. It’s no wonder that KRS-One asks about the role of the police: “Who protects us from you?”

If the government is to be viewed as legitimate, citizens have to believe that the state places equal importance on their lives as members of the state. When young blacks review their social history, they have grounds to doubt that the state will protect or value them equally. And if physical protection is one of the basic benefits of being a member of the social contract, then black urban residents have reason to question the value of contractual membership. The behavior of the police in inner cities

<sup>11</sup> “Farrakhan’s Mission,” *Newsweek* (19th March, 1990), p. 25.

<sup>12</sup> Lawson, “Crime,” p. 16

forces us to reassess our obligations to the state and our understanding of the legitimacy of the social order. For many urban youths, the actions of the state indicate a broken contract and, as a result, they conclude that not only is there no obligation on the part of blacks to obey the law, but the police should be regarded as enemy combatants in a state of war. Ice Cube expresses this antagonism when he exclaims, "I wanna kill [uncle] Sam":

I wanna kill him, cause he tried to play me like the trick  
 But you see, I'm the wrong nigga to fuck wit' . . .  
 It seems like he got the whole country behind him  
 So it's sort of hard to find him.  
 But when I do, gotta put my gatt in his mouth  
 Pump seventeen rounds, make his brains hang out.<sup>13</sup>

The enemy is all around us. We are at war. The war is a war for the minds, hearts, and souls of black folks. This is the message of revolutionary rap and of the politically conscious in the hip-hop community.

### Romanticizing Rap?

A number of objections could be raised against my interpretation of rap music and hip-hop culture. First, am I romanticizing a criminal culture? Many middle-class blacks and whites think that rap is the music of young black criminals. Why should we think that the concept of the social contract is applicable to them? I believe that the broad impact of rap music was clearly shown in the aftermath of the Rodney King verdict. In surveys of urban youth, rappers were seen as the only group that understood their plight and spoke the truth about conditions in America. This suggests that the appeal of hip hop reaches far beyond criminals.

It might be claimed: "It's only music!" Yet fans of rap view it not only as music but as their communication network, a kind of black CNN, as Chuck D has dubbed it. When blacks are victimized in the United States, the event is retold in rap songs, spreading the "news." A related objection is that rap and hip-hop culture are simply fads. But rap is now more than twenty-

five years old and has spread from U.S. urban centers like New York and L.A. to countries all around the world. There are now rappers in Africa, Russia, China, and France, and they use the art form to express their dissatisfaction with the "powers that be" in their own countries. It's beyond the fad stage.

However, it might still be asked, why should we look for some political philosophy underpinning hip-hop attitudes? And why the social contract in particular? The social contract idea is an important philosophical element of our conception of political authority. One aspect of this philosophy is the role of the state in protecting the lives of its citizens. Hip-hop artists, like many Americans, understand the relationship between the state and its members as one of reciprocal obligations. Many political rappers maintain that the United States has never lived up to its obligations to ensure justice for African Americans. Indeed, some seem to agree with philosopher Charles Mills that the social contract was never meant to include blacks.<sup>14</sup> Mills contends there was a social contract but it was a "racial" contract, one that was constructed to maintain white supremacy. It is this state-against-black-America perception that defines this political stance. This position is articulated in the music of Talib Kweli (*Quality*), David Banner (*MTA2: Baptized in Dirty Water*), Dilated Peoples (*Expansion Team*), Paris (*Sonic Jihad*), The Coup (*Steal This Double Album*), and others. These rappers have a political philosophy, and from Grandmaster Flash's "The Message" to Mos Def's "War" (*The New Danger*) this message has been increasingly negative about the treatment of blacks in America and beyond.

For many young urban dwellers, rap has become their way to get their message across despite continuing racial discrimination. In this regard, rap music serves a political function and is perhaps the best method to get news and information to other urban communities. The one message that comes across very clearly is that black urban neighborhoods are under siege. Whites in power direct the attack and the goal is to destroy the black race. As Gang Starr notes (*Daily Operations*), the condition of blacks in America is not an accident, there is a white conspiracy.

<sup>14</sup> Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997); also see Bill Lawson, "Locke and the Legal Obligations of Black Americans," *Public Affairs Quarterly* 49 (1989).

<sup>13</sup> Ice Cube, "I Wanna Kill Sam," *Death Certificate* (Priority, 1991).

### Post-Civil Rights Music

Martin Kilson has argued that scholars of hip hop such as Todd Boyd and Michael Eric Dyson uncritically endorse the “hedonistic, materialistic, nihilistic, sadistic, and misogynistic ideas and values propagated by most hip-hop entertainers.”<sup>15</sup> This criticism has merit, but it is one-sided. There are members of the hip-hop community who see their music as a continuation of the civil rights struggle, as post-civil rights music. These are young people who grew up in the United States and are a product of our collective history. Hip-hop culture comes out of that history. There is an important relationship between hip-hop culture and the historical struggle of Africans in America. Rap music and hip-hop culture have roots in the slave songs, freedom songs, and artists such as The Last Poets, Watts Prophets, and Gil Scott-Heron. Yet, rap represents a break with these forms of sonic expression in that it is the sound of young people who came of age in a period of great racial change in the social and political texture of the United States.

Hip-hop culture does have its roots in the political struggles of blacks. But hip hop has developed in a cultural context that is infused with post-modern critiques. It should not be surprising that young blacks have different views about life in the United States. Such young persons were never denied entrance to places of public accommodation, they have seen more black images on television and in the movies than at any other time in American history, and they can make more money in a few years than my family has made since we have been in America. It may seem strange to think that these youths could have any frustrations about their life in America. However, their frustration with America is simply a different type of frustration than that of previous generations of African Americans. Many urban youths see themselves in a battle for the social and political life of African peoples in a manner that older Americans, black and white, do not and cannot see. This may explain why old-school messages of social responsibility and civil protest are not effective in reaching many young urban black teenagers. Hip-hop culture, at least the political segment, speaks to the unfinished business of social justice but in a post-civil rights voice.

<sup>15</sup> Martin Kilson, “The Pretense of Hip-Hop Black Leadership,” *The Black Commentator*, [http://www.blackcommentator.com/50/50\\_kilson.html](http://www.blackcommentator.com/50/50_kilson.html).

## 14 Halfway Revolution: From That Gangsta Hobbes to Radical Liberals

LIONEL K. MCPHERSON

Rappers and rap commentators have claimed there’s revolution in the music. They suggest not simply that rap is revolutionary in form—lyrics spoken rather than sung, sound driven by distilled beats rather than melody. No, they also suggest that rap is *politically* revolutionary. Exhibit A is Public Enemy and much of the hype surrounding this greatest of rap groups.<sup>1</sup>

Anyone who hasn’t heard Nelly or, back in the day, MC Hammer or the Sugar Hill Gang might assume that rap is by nature music of urban anger and protest. It isn’t, of course. Still, politically-oriented rap—which speaks to black life under conditions of adversity—has been a defining strain of the music. If you doubt there’s room for political themes in this era dominated by pop-rap, listen to Dead Prez or The Coup.<sup>2</sup>

Ironically, most political rap has not been politically revolutionary. I say this not as a criticism, only as an observation. While political rap does represent a culture of resistance, it’s not true that such rap “represents a fundamental challenge to liberal political philosophy.”<sup>3</sup> This view gets at least two things wrong:

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Public Enemy, “Revolutionary Generation,” *Fear of a Black Planet* (Def Jam, 1990). Music critic Stephen Thomas Erlewine writes that PE “pioneered a variation of hardcore rap that was musically and politically revolutionary.” Biography of Public Enemy, *AMG Allmusic*, <http://www.allmusic.com> (5th February, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Dead Prez, *RBG: Revolutionary But Gangsta* (Columbia, 2004); and The Coup, *Steal This Double Album* (Foad, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> Track 13 in this volume, p. 161.