

Hip Hop and the Corporate Function of Colonization

Written by Jared A. Ball, Ph.D. ID3659
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Having elsewhere looked at the function of mass media as primary mechanisms of the maintenance of colony, recent events have again emerged requiring further investigation into the function of corporate control over the cultural expression of colonized populations. Though not specific to hip-hop the example as explored through that most popular of cultural expressions may help to make more clear the imperative of organization and political struggle in 2007. Within the last few weeks alone we have seen recent decisions and trends evolve demonstrating the intent and need among those in power to further ensure that mass media will perform its primary (only?) function of manipulating popular consciousness for the purpose of manipulating behavior of the audience (victims). These developments can only be understood in the context of a continuing process of subjugation in which media play a primary role in suppressing dissent.

Most recently examples of this include the successful lobbying (legal bribery) of congress by Time Warner to increase postal rates for magazines making new or small magazines unable to start or compete for national distribution. There are the continuing efforts of EMI to sell itself off to either Warner Music Group or the newest media trend of a private equity firm. And then there was the Copyright Royalty Board issuing its new policy of charging commercial and non-commercial terrestrial and internet broadcasters per-song royalty fees which have been estimated to mean that 85% of internet broadcasters will fold unable to afford the cost of operation. This decision, it must be noted, also affects my own beloved Washington, DC Pacifica Radio affiliate WPFW whose song royalties fees, based on this decision, will no longer be covered by the right-wing-led Corporation for Public Broadcasting meaning further economic hardship for the network.

To this must be added the recent exposure of Interscope Records' "lyrics committee," who have determined that the recently released album from Young Buck would not include a track called Fuck tha Police due to its "violent content." These examples form a segment of what is the need of those in power to maintain intellectual boundaries established for their own protection. This elite uses the structure of corporate governance to maintain this control in relative anonymity where CEOs and commercial spokespeople become mere illusions masking their position as modern-day colonial administrators. At times called the petit-bourgeoisie, or even the Black bourgeoisie, they are simply that group which, as administrators, administer to society that which limits or confounds ranges of thought so as to keep people from stepping – intellectually or literally – beyond acceptable parameters. In this case these administrators become the intellectual equivalent of the guard at the gate telling you beyond this line you may not cross,

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that is, not without serious repercussion.

Continued references to Frantz Fanon, too often made with no equal reference or focus on what prompted his brilliant analyses, ignore the fundamental colonizing process still underway. This corporate-led lockdown of mass media and popular culture is part of a long historical process to maintain “order” over populations whose ability to produce and popularize a revolutionary culture and, therefore, conscious behavior would mean the end of established power. This threat, one that is and should be feared, is mitigated by a corporate structure designed, as Fanon explained, to not “destroy the culture of the colonized” but to instead allow certain forms to be carefully selected for promotion and popularity. This popularity then encourages perceptions of the colonized that support their colonization and, in fact, encourage a behavior among the colonized which produces self-inflicted wounds that while in reality result from externally-based oppression are justified via perception. Here, again, is how a Viacom-owned radio station would broadcast Don Imus while also broadcasting the very hip-hop later blamed for his remarks on BET, MTV, and here in Washington, DC on WPGC 95.5 FM, the city’s leading Black-targeted radio station. “We play what the people want and produce” is their claim. Yet when DC-area artists, such as Head-Roc, DJ EuRok, Pookanu, Asheru to name too few, produce high quality hip-hop critical of our colonial status, police brutality, impoverished schools, etc. or even make music that is just fun-loving and brilliantly worded they are suppressed. Censorship is political not linguistic. It’s not the “fuck” in Young Buck’s Fuck da Police that was censored.

The sociology of a corporation demonstrates its function. Boards of directors with interlocks that extend the influence of this tiny collective, themselves selected by controlling holders of stock, elect Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) who – as employees of those stockholders – work at the bidding of their further removed and mostly anonymous (certainly to us) bosses. What those bosses want is well beyond money, which itself exists only to manage/manipulate the behavior of the majority who have none, they want security and safety. Both require a popular consciousness or “manufactured” opinion which supports this by preventing even the idea of the righteous – even if forceful – redistribution of wealth and service. This is why songs saying “fuck the police” must be censored, attacked, omitted or demonized even if, as is the case with Young Buck, a video may picture Huey Newton but is actually more about an individual self-defense of selling dope than a collective self-defense in the furtherance of revolutionary intercommunalism or Black nationalism.

Corporate lockdown of popular media is a political necessity and scientific inevitability requiring further description of this process, along with suggested avenues of resistance, which will be the focus of subsequent columns. Our approach to the study of and response to media must be akin to that of Huey P. Newton who said he “studied law to become a better burglar.”

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Find more on Jared A. Ball, Ph.D.

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