

How Neo-Marxists Changed American Popular Music... and Culture

Jeffrey D. Breshears

Two Paths to the Bottom

In their book, *How Now Shall We Live?*, authors Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey contrast the dystopian predictions of **George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*** with those of **Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World***. Both forecast a bleak future for human society, but they differed on how that society would be managed and manipulated by the ruling elite.

Orwell feared a brutal totalitarian-style system in which Big Brother controlled all aspects of people's lives through intimidation and coercion, whereas Huxley envisioned a society that had been so compromised and corrupted by narcissism, materialism and hedonism that the people had voluntarily surrendered their freedoms for a life of ease, security and immediate gratification. While Orwell warned of an oppressive regime that controlled the media and utilized propaganda to spread lies and suppress the truth, Huxley depicted a self-absorbed, complacent and entertainment-obsessed society in which no one *cared* about the truth.

Whereas Orwell warned of an all-powerful and intrusive government that banned books and other kinds of free expression, Huxley forecast a softer and more seductive kind of tyranny in which the government wouldn't *need* to ban books or censor speech because no one *cared* about reading serious books or speaking out on political issues anymore. While Orwell predicted a society deprived of information by government-controlled censors, Huxley predicted a society over-saturated by information from electronic media to the point that people lost the ability to process rationally what they saw and heard. And whereas Orwell described a world in which the government controlled people by inflicting pain, Huxley imagined a world where people were manipulated by their craving for pleasure, safety and security.

As Colson and Pearcey observe, "Both novels have proven to be uncannily accurate – Orwell describing the totalitarian plague of our century, Huxley the sickness of affluent free societies." Huxley was especially critical of civil libertarians who are always vigilantly on guard against an "externally imposed tyranny" but seem oblivious to the fact that people in prosperous Western societies are particularly vulnerable to being manipulated by the mindless distractions of modern technology. (This is a theme that the French philosopher and sociologist Jacques Ellul commented on extensively in many of his works, most notably in *The Technological Society*.) More specifically, Colson and Pearcey remark that "nowhere is the appetite for distraction more seductively tantalized by the banal, mindless entertainment of pop culture than in America." [See Charles Colson and Nancy Pearcey, *How Now Shall We Live?* Tyndale House Publishers (1999), pp. 468-69.]

The kind of Neo-Marxism that the Frankfurt School's Institute for Social Research promoted was certainly a kinder and gentler form of Marxism that avoids the kind of violent revolution that classical Marxism sanctioned, but both ideologies share a similar goal: a thoroughly socialist society in which government controls the economy as well as the public lives of its citizens. In that respect, Neo-Marxism is merely a more gradual and subtle means to the same end. Posing as democratic, egalitarian and tolerant, in

fact it is committed ultimately to the destruction of traditional American values and ideals – including the principles of economic freedom and basic civil liberties such as a freedom of speech, freedom of information, and freedom of religion.



George Orwell



Aldous Huxley

Recent American history seems to support Huxley’s thesis that we have as much to fear from cultural seduction and the pitfalls of prosperity than from outright government tyranny. In reality, the two alternatives are not mutually-exclusive as a Huxlian society can so weaken the social and moral fabric as to set the stage for the ultimate Orwellian nightmare. In fact, that very scenario appears to be playing out at the present time as Uncle Sam is being transformed into Doctor Sam and eventually, one fears, into Big Brother Sam.

These are chilling prospects, but they are the inevitable products of the process of the secularization of Western (and American) culture that have been in effect since the dawn of the Enlightenment as first manifest in the tragedy that was the French Revolution. The tide of secularism has ebbed and flowed over the past two centuries, but over time there has been an obvious and undeniable erosion of traditional Judeo/Christian values and ethics. In his book, *The Thirties*, Malcolm Muggeridge commented on the collective damage to Western civilization wrought by secular idealists from Voltaire and Rousseau in the 1700s to Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and all the other cultural subversives who have followed in their wake. As Muggeridge observed...

We are living in a nightmare precisely because we have tried to set up an earthly paradise. We have believed in “progress,” trusted in human leadership, rendered unto Caesar the things that are God’s.... There is no wisdom except in the fear of God; but

no one fears God; therefore there is no wisdom. Man’s history reduces itself to the rise and fall of material civilizations, one Tower of Babel after another... downwards into abysses which are horrible to contemplate.

Similarly, in his classic, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis put forth a succinct philosophy of history in which he noted:

This is the key to history. Terrific energy is expended – civilisations are built up – excellent institutions devised, but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaw always brings the [most] selfish and cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin.... That is what Satan has done to us humans.

So what is this thing that always goes wrong? Theologians point to the fact that human nature never changes, that we are stuck in a perpetual and unhealthy cycle of addiction that the Bible labels “sin”. In his masterful trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien identified the “one key” that controls the whole flow of history as the lust for Power – the ultimate false idol that is manifest in myriad forms of Egoism, Materialism, Hedonism, Status, Wealth, Success, Intelligence, Independence, Influence, and Arrogance. All are humanistic substitutes for God, and all ultimately lead to Huxlian-style moral and spiritual impotence and eventual servitude to an Orwellian-style Omnipotent State.

Neo-Marxism and Popular Culture

Red Channels

In Martin Jay’s* book, *The Dialectical Imagination*, the chapter on “Aesthetic Theory and the Critique of Mass Culture” is particularly insightful and relevant given the Neo-Marxist influence on popular culture since the 1940s.

Before the 20th century the distinction between “art” and “entertainment” was more pronounced (just as the line between journalistic news and entertainment was more clearly defined before the advent of TV cable news). As generally understood, the appreciation of fine art required a greater level of

* Martin Jay (b. 1944) is a Neo-Marxist historian at the University of California - Berkeley whose research chronicles the history and philosophy of the Frankfurt School’s Institute of Social Research and its influence on the formation of the New Left.

background knowledge and focused concentration than did popular entertainment, and its purpose was to inspire, enlighten, and elevate the human soul. With the invention of motion pictures, recorded music, radio and television, these remarkable new technologies had the potential to bring the great works of art to millions of people who otherwise would never have had access to them. Conversely, these media could also pander to the lowest common denominator. And as Neo-Marxist theoreticians realized early on, they could also be exploited with great effect to dull people’s sensitivities and reprogram their thinking for propagandistic purposes and, ultimately, for social control.

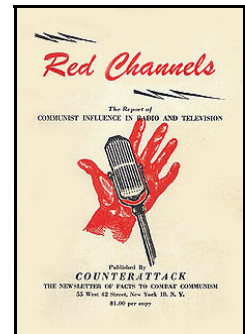
Of course, much of popular culture, including most music, movies, television, etc., is merely crass entertainment, and as such much of it is trivial, banal and inconsequential – except for the fact that it reflects the feelings and the shallow thinking of so many people. Nonetheless, some popular entertainment is truly significant, and its cumulative effect can be substantial. Many political leftists understood this from the outset, which is why they were eager to use these fascinating new communications industries to promote their agenda. As an example, the Neo-Marxist theoretician **Theodore Adorno** predicted in 1944 that “Television aims at the synthesis of radio and film,... [and] its consequences will be quite enormous.”

In 1941 **Max Horkheimer** and Adorno, two of the most prominent scholars associated with the Neo-Marxist think-tank, the Frankfurt School, left Columbia University in New York City and relocated to Pacific Palisades near Santa Monica, California, where they joined other German leftists such as the playwright Bertolt Brecht and the composer Arnold Schoenberg. Unfortunately, no substantive accounts have been written that explore their Hollywood connections during these years or their influence in the movie and TV industries. But as early as 1938 the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) had released a report claiming that many Communists were involved in the entertainment industry.

In 1947, at the outset of the post-war “Red Scare,” HUAC convened hearings and subpoenaed more than forty writers, directors, actors and producers. Before the interrogations began, Walt Disney testified that the threat of Communists in the film industry was indeed

serious, and he even named specific people whom he suspected of being Communists. Disney was then followed by Ronald Reagan, president of the Screen Actors Guild, who accused some within his union of using “communist-like tactics” in an attempt to control union policies. Subsequently, ten of those called before the committee refused to testify and were cited for contempt of Congress. These were the infamous “Hollywood Ten,” and all were given one-year prison sentences and officially blacklisted by TV and movie executives.

In 1950 a pamphlet entitled *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, published by the conservative business newsletter, *Counterattack*, named 151 entertainment industry professionals as “Red Fascists” (i.e., past or present members of the Communist



Party U.S.A.) or Communist sympathizers.* Many of those named, along with a growing list of others, were barred from employment in the media and the entertainment industry for a number of years. One of the most notable was the singer/songwriter Pete Seeger, who was kept off television for twenty years until he was finally invited to perform on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* in 1967. With characteristic defiance, Seeger sang an anti-war song, “Waist Deep in the Big Muddy,” dedicated to President Johnson. [Note: For an eccentric satire on the Communist involvement in Hollywood, see the 2016 movie, *Hail Caesar!*]

* Among those listed in *Red Channels* were **Langston Hughes** (writer), **Lillian Hellman** (author and playwright), **Orson Welles** (author, writer and director), **Arthur Miller** (playwright and a husband of Marilyn Monroe), **Leonard Bernstein** (composer), **Aaron Copeland** (composer), **Edward G. Robinson** (actor), **Will Geer** (actor), **Lee J. Cobb** (actor), **Paul Robeson** (singer and actor), **Lena Horne** (singer and actor), **Artie Shaw** (musician), **Alan Lomax** (folklorist and musicologist), and **Pete Seeger** (folk singer).

Among those later blacklisted as Communists or Red-sympathizers were **Charlie Chaplin** (actor, director and producer), **Richard Attenborough** (actor, producer and director), and **Harry Belafonte** (singer).

The Music Front

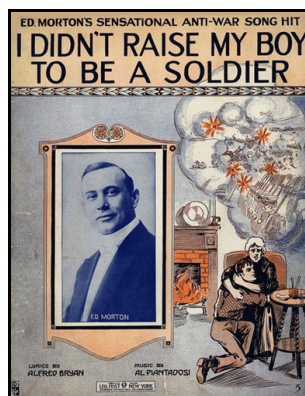
Social observers have long recognized the power of song. In *Republic*, Plato urged the philosopher-kings in his ideal state to carefully control the style and the content of the music in their culture. Plato realized the power and potential of music in terms of its influence and impact on a people's values and ideals, and like the Neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School he understood that culture drives politics, not vice-versa. As the novelist John Steinbeck once noted, popular music expresses the most fundamental values and beliefs of a people and constitutes their “sharpest statement” about who and what they are. According to Steinbeck, we can learn more about a society by listening to its songs than by any other means of observation, since “into the songs go all their hopes and hurts, the anger, fears, the wants and aspirations.” Leo Lowenthal, a Neo-Marxist German sociologist who was associated with the Frankfurt School, expressed the same idea when he wrote that “mass culture is psychoanalysis in reverse.”

Popular culture, including music, has always functioned as a kind of social barometer, and throughout history the significant issues and events of the day have often been expressed through the medium of music. From the stirring broadside ballads of the Revolutionary era to the campfire sing-alongs of the Civil War, from Joe Hill's radical labor anthems of the early 20th century to the Depression-era Dust Bowl ballads of Woody Guthrie, from the folk and rock socio/political commentaries of the 1960s to the nihilistic rantings of contemporary punk and rap, popular music has often expressed the *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the times. Throughout the 20th century hundreds of popular songs functioned essentially as socio/political musical editorials, and although most were quickly forgotten and left little lasting impression, some were quite profound and undeniably influential.

[Note: Before the advent of the phonograph, the radio, and the mass marketing of music, popular music was indistinguishable from folk music in that one generation's popular songs became the folk songs of succeeding generations. It wasn't until the early 1900s, with the evolution of a commercial music industry, that popular music became a distinct category from folk music.]

Prior to the 20th century social protest songs often disguised their messages, such as in the Mother Goose rhymes. However, with the coalescence of several different reform movements in the early 1900s, socio/political protest music became more open and explicit. In particular, the radical left-wing of the labor movement, as characterized by the Marxist-oriented Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), utilized music to rally the troops and advance its agenda. Labor anthems, such as those composed by songwriters such as Joe Hill, contained sharp and explicit lyrics and were sung with revivalistic fervor by the union faithful.

Since popular music echoes the spirit of the times, socio/political message songs tend to proliferate particularly during times of crisis and turmoil. This was certainly the case during World War I when Tin Pan Alley songwriters churned out scores of topical songs related to the war – everything from the anti-war the anti-war “I Didn't Raise My Boy To Be a Soldier” to flag-waving anthems such as “Over There” and social commentaries like “How Ya Gonna Keep ‘em



Down on the Farm (After



They've Seen Poree)?”

During the raucous and prosperous Roaring Twenties few serious topical songs were written and recorded, but following the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the onset of the Great Depression there was once again a flurry of socially-relevant musical commentaries. Many of these songs, such as “Happy Days Are Here Again” and “There's No Depression in Love,” were slick and jazzy productions designed to revive the flagging spirits of the American people, while others dealt more seriously with social realities such as “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” “Hobo's Lullaby,” and many of Woody Guthrie's topical ballads.

Likewise, World War II inspired scores of songs that expressed the mood of the times – everything

from Irving Berlin’s “God Bless America,” “Remember Pearl Harbor” and “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” to Johnny Mercer’s “G.I. Jive,” The Andrews Sisters’ “Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy,” The Murphy Sisters’ “You’re a Sap, Mister Jap,” Spike Jones’ “Der Fuhrer’s Face,” and Peggy Lee’s “Waiting For the Train To Come In.” In the relatively placid Fifties, however, pop music once again retreated into total banality. Few songs dealt with themes other than romance (e.g., Elvis Presley’s “Love Me, Tender,” Pat Boone’s “Love Letters In the Sand,” etc.) or teenage hedonism (Bill Haley & the Comets’ “Rock Around the Clock,” Chuck Berry’s “Sweet Little Sixteen,” etc.). Then, the chaotic Sixties once again generated a great outpouring of socio/political songs. But unlike the past, this time counter-cultural themes dominated the music, and the lyrics tended to be overwhelmingly critical of mainstream American lifestyles and values.

Since the Sixties popular music in general has become considerably more cynical and sexual. Much of it is an outright celebration of decadence, and the glorification of sex, drugs, violence, irresponsible hedonism and mindless materialism is certainly disturbing. If Britney Spears, Madonna, Eminem, Lady Gaga, the hip-hoppers and the gangsta rappers speak for a critical mass of young people today, this is truly alarming. And although most of this music is not overtly political, the very fact that these people are pop culture icons is a damning indictment of the aesthetic as well as the moral state of our culture.



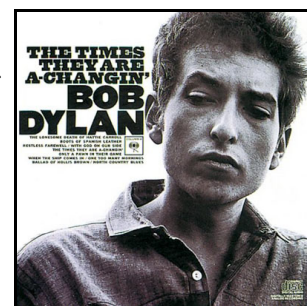
Many wonder why so much popular music is so ugly, so degenerate, so sexualized, so obscene, and so fixated on drugs and violence. Since all art is an expression of philosophy and values, much of the problem is due to the insidious influence of nihilism and postmodernism in contemporary American culture. But some of it directly reflects a Neo-Marxist political ideology as well. To radical left-wing social critics, the reason why so much modern art expresses such rage and dissatisfaction is because it reflects the

realities of living in a repressive and oppressive society under the heavy yoke of capitalist exploitation and traditional Christian-influenced moral values.

Cultural Marxists argue that all of life is a struggle against the stultifying forces of authoritarian fascism. Originally, classical Marxism focused narrowly on economic oppression and class conflict, but by the 1930s Neo-Marxists began to widen the scope of their cultural critique to include a broader range of social and psychological factors, especially as they related to two issues: sexual liberation and social justice as it related to the plight of the oppressed – i.e., marginalized minorities and others who were victims of the bourgeois social order. The victim class included, in particular, low-income workers, racial minorities, radical feminists, homosexuals, and non-Christians in general. Therefore, it was within the context of their Neo-Marxist Critical Theory that they advocated the politicization of the arts as part of a full-scale assault on Western culture.

A Two-Pronged Attack

Among cultural Marxists there have been two competing theories regarding the proper role of revolutionary art. The first approach, which Lenin endorsed and which has always been the most common, focuses on content (or substance) over style (or structure). In this approach, art serves as a form of “agitprop” (agitation/propaganda), and it emphasizes overtly social and political messages. However, these messages may be either relatively mild and virtually subliminal or direct and confrontational. Examples of the former would include many of the protest songs of the early Sixties such as Bob Dylan’s “Blowin’ in the Wind,” Pete Seeger’s “If I Had a Hammer” and “Where Have All the Flowers Gone,” and Phil Ochs’ “Power and the Glory.” By the mid-Sixties, though, much of the protest music became more explicit and aggressive as characterized by songs such as Dylan’s “The Times They Are A-changin’,” Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction,” The Beatles’ “Revolution,” or “I Feel Like I’m-Fixin’-To-Die Rag” by Country Joe & the Fish.



The alternative theory of revolutionary art emphasizes form rather than content, and the message has more to do with style than content. This approach has been incorporated into various types of avant-garde music such as atonal free form jazz (most notably, the music of John Cage), the extended guitar “freak-outs” that were popular among some rock bands in the Sixties, and in recordings such as John Lennon’s bizarre “Revolution No. 9” on The Beatles’ *White Album*. More recently, genres such as punk rock, heavy metal, rap and hip-hop typically emphasize form over content. In much of this music the lyrics are either vague, cluttered or virtually unintelligible, but the mood is obviously angry, aggressive and anti-social. In such music, form trumps content to the point that, to borrow Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum, the medium *is* the message. Despite the lack of any clearly articulated or intelligible message, such music can function as a potent expression of socio/political protest.

The aforementioned **Theodor Adorno** was one of the left’s most prominent cultural analysts and a staunch advocate of the form-over-content theory. Adorno began his academic career as a music critic, and as a doctrinaire Marxist he had a peculiar take on music as a political statement. He was contemptuous of popular culture in general, which he regarded as bourgeois, frivolous and counter-revolutionary, and as a musicologist he was particularly scornful of popular music, which he considered trivial, insipid and banal (which of course most of it was – and always has been). As an early proponent of postmodernism, Adorno believed that “truth” and “morality” are completely relative to the historical circumstances that work unconsciously on the artist himself. In his article, “The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and Political Correctness,” Michael Minnicino describes Adorno’s quixotic relativism as it derived from the Marxist theory of dialectical materialism:



[T]he artist does not consciously create works in order to uplift society, but instead unconsciously transmits the ideological assumptions of the culture

into which he was born. The issue is no longer what is universally true, but what can be plausibly interpreted by the self-appointed guardians of the *Zeitgeist*. [Michael J. Minnicino, “The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and ‘Political Correctness’.” *Fidelio*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Winter 1992), p. 10.]

For Adorno, then, the great challenge for the socially-conscious artist in the midst of an unjust, ugly and exploitative capitalistic culture is to expose the phoniness and utter bankruptcy of such a culture and thereby increase the level of discontent and alienation among the masses. This requires new cultural expressions that will increase this sense of frustration, anger and rebellion. [Note: If this brings to mind distortionistic modern art and sterile cubist architecture – along with anarchistic music such as heavy metal, punk rock, rap and hip-hop – then the reader is on the right track.]

Adorno was more than just a cultural elitist, and he held a radical view of art and culture that few found palatable. According to him, since modern bourgeois culture is intrinsically “repressive” and “conformist,” art could only be “authentic” if it were non-commercial, dissonant and alienating – in other words, atonal. Therefore, any art form such as music that is highly structured and conveys a sense of joy or contentment or harmony is at best an expression of ignorance or at worst an endorsement of the fascist authoritarian status quo. Declaring that “defiance of society includes defiance of its language,” Adorno might also have added that defiance of society includes not only the rejection of its traditional values but its traditional art forms as well. As he stated, “We interpret [art] as a kind of code language for processes taking place within society, which must be deciphered by means of critical analysis.” Therefore, the true purpose of music and every other modern art form should be to subvert anything inspiring and uplifting so as to thwart any transcendent spiritual inclinations, leaving the only creative option to be what the Neo-Marxist playwright Bertolt Brecht called the “estrangement effect.”

According to Adorno, until current social and political contradictions are reconciled to the Marxist conception of “social justice,” art must always reflect the current state of dissonance and alienation. For Adorno, everything is political, and since bourgeois capitalistic society is innately discordant and

repressive, the only legitimately authentic music is that which avoids commercialism and “spurious harmony” and expresses the “contradictions” of modern life. Furthermore, he reasoned, just as true artistic creativity is determined by social factors, so too is people’s subjective appreciation of art. This is why popular culture, including virtually all popular music, tends to be so deplorably vacuous: it expresses bourgeois values and the unsophisticated tastes of the masses, who are the psychologically- and culturally-stifled products of a bourgeois capitalistic system and its propaganda. The People have to be liberated from such constraints, and Adorno believed this could be accomplished in part through authentic art and music – which in the current social context must be revolutionary, countercultural, and discordant. In his words:

A successful work [of art]... is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure....

Art... always was, and is, a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions, religious and otherwise.... [Quoted in Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, p. 179]

[Note: Marxism has long been recognized as a kind of surrogate religion in the sense that it puts forth a comprehensive belief system and a grand historical metanarrative, and its fundamental doctrines cover everything from atheistic naturalism and a secular philosophy of human nature to theories related to dialectical materialism, class warfare and violent revolution, the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the eventual emergence of a utopian classless society. Like Christians, Marxists reject the popular notion of “Art for art’s sake” – the idea that art should merely be an expression of the individual creative imagination of the artist him/herself. From point of fact, Marxists understand that art is in no way values-free or values-neutral. Wittingly or not, all art expresses the beliefs and ideals of its creators, and the concept of artistic “creative freedom” is in many respects illusory. Unlike Christians, however, Marxists are strict determinists who believe that sociological factors alone *determine* who and what we are. Conversely, Christians don’t deny that society and culture can *influence* (or *condition*) our character and values, but

human beings still have a measure of free choice as a result of being created in the *Imago Dei* – the image of God. Still, like Christians, Marxists believe that the ultimate goal of art is to serve a higher and transcendent purpose. It is not merely about individual self-expression but a reflection of ultimate truth and reality.]

For Adorno, even modern jazz, which many conservatives feared was promoting sensuality and undermining traditional morality, should be rejected as just another commercial commodity. Observing that it served primarily as dance or ambient background music, he challenged the claim that jazz could be used to advance the revolutionary agenda. In fact, he argued, rather than promoting dissonance and alienation, jazz music actually mitigated it either by distracting or tranquilizing the mind and therefore reconciling the alienated individual with mainstream culture.

Prior to Adorno, most criticism of popular culture came from social conservatives. Now, however, it was attacked as a tool of the status quo that pacified the masses and diverted their attention away from all the oppression, repression and social injustice inherent in American culture. As such, it was part of a massive bourgeois capitalist conspiracy. The historian Martin Jay explains:

The Frankfurt School disliked mass culture, not because it was democratic, but precisely because it was not.... The culture industry administered a nonspontaneous [and] phony culture rather than the real thing. The old distinction between high and low culture had all but vanished in the ‘stylized barbarism’ of mass culture.... The subliminal message of almost all that passed for art was conformity and resignation.

Increasingly, the Institute came to feel that the culture industry enslaved men in far more subtle and effective ways than the crude methods of domination practiced in earlier eras. The false harmony [promoted in popular culture] was in some ways more sinister than the clash of social contradictions, because of its ability to lull its victims into passive acceptance.... Moreover, the spread of technology served the culture industry in America just as it helped tighten the control of authoritarian governments in Europe. Radio, Horkheimer and Adorno argued, was to fascism as the printing press had been to the Reformation.... [ibid, pp. 216-17]

In his study of the Frankfurt School, Jay concludes that the Institute’s greatest impact on American intellectual life was its critique of mass culture along with its analysis of America as an innately authoritarian and fascist society. But Adorno’s philosophy of culture and music was too extreme even for many of his Neo-Marxist colleagues, some of whom challenged his basic assumptions. **Walter Benjamin**, Adorno’s colleague and a notable philosopher and essayist, expressed the more orthodox Marxist view that came to prevail among most left-wing social critics. Unlike Adorno, Benjamin recognized the immense potential of agitprop commercial entertainment, and he contended that popular music could be a potent political weapon in the culture war in terms of undermining traditional values, radicalizing the masses and transforming culture. Adorno was unconvinced, and argued that any such attempts to correlate commercial popular music with “socialist realism” only succeeded in promoting the kind of “premature harmony” that was counter-revolutionary.

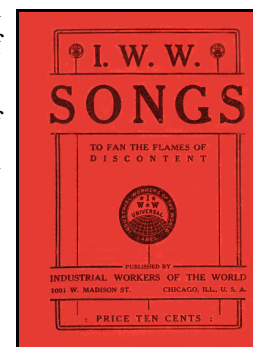
Most left-wing artists took Benjamin’s view because Adorno’s more radical critique essentially eliminated any audience for their art. In this regard Bertolt Brecht was particularly significant in his utilization of the theater as a political forum to explore what he called “the critical aesthetics of dialectical materialism.” Brecht inspired a whole new generation of Marxist artists and entertainers, and his influence was particularly significant in films and the theater. Meanwhile in America, perhaps the most successful and influential propagandist for the Marxist cause was the actor and movie producer, **Charlie Chaplin**, whose comic genius in films such as *Modern Times* and *The Great Dictator* skillfully and subtly promoted the left-wing agenda.



Charlie Chaplin

Adorno’s more radical views aside, many Marxists understood intuitively the power of politicized music as a social and cultural force. As noted earlier, the IWW was a radical Marxist labor union in the early

1900s that included a fragile and volatile coalition of Communists, socialists and anarchists. According to its Manifesto, the union was founded on “the class struggle” and “the irrepressible conflict between the capitalist class and the working class,” and its motto proclaimed, “The final aim is revolution.” IWW rallies often resembled religious revivals with stirring, emotional speeches and a lot of passionate group singing. Songwriters converted scores of well-known church hymns and traditional folk tunes into labor anthems such as Laura Payne Emerson’s “Industrial Workers of the World” (sung to the tune of “Wabash Cannonball”), Joe Hill’s “There Is Power In a Union (tune: “There Is Power In the Blood”), Ralph Cheney’s “Onward, One Big Union” (tune: “Onward, Christian Soldiers”), and G. G. Allen’s “One Big Industrial Union” (tune: “Marching Through Georgia”). The IWW even published its own hymnal of sorts, the *Little Red Songbook*, featuring the most popular of all labor anthems, Ralph Chaplin’s “Solidarity Forever,” (sung to the tune of “Battle Hymn of the Republic”) – one verse of which proclaims:



*They [the capitalists] have
taken untold millions
That they never toiled to earn
But without our brain and muscle
Not a single wheel can turn
We can break their haughty power
Gain our freedom when we learn
That the union makes us strong.*

(CHORUS)

*Solidarity forever!
Solidarity forever!
Solidarity forever!
For the union makes us strong!*

Like the Socialist Party in America, the Communist Party USA and other far left groups, the IWW was constantly racked by internal sectarian disputes and power struggles. During World War I it lost most of its members due to its militant anti-war position, and many of its leaders were charged with treason and sent to prison. “Big Bill” Haywood, the public face of the union, evaded prison by fleeing to the USSR, where he was treated as a celebrity by Lenin’s regime. When he died in 1928, Haywood was buried in the Kremlin

– one of only two Americans so honored. In its short but colorful history the IWW produced quite a few memorable characters including the firebrand agitators **Elizabeth Gurley Flynn** and **John Reed** (featured in the 1982 movie, *Reds*), along with **Joe Hill**, America’s first notable left-wing protest singer/songwriter.

In 1915, on the eve before he was scheduled to be hanged, Joe Hill explained his motivation for writing socio/political protest songs:

A pamphlet, no matter how good, is never read more than once, but a song is learned by heart and repeated over and over. I maintain that if a person can put a few cold, common sense facts into a song, and dress them up in a cloak of humor to take the dryness off of them, he will succeed in reaching a great number of workers who are too unintelligent or too indifferent to read a pamphlet or an editorial.



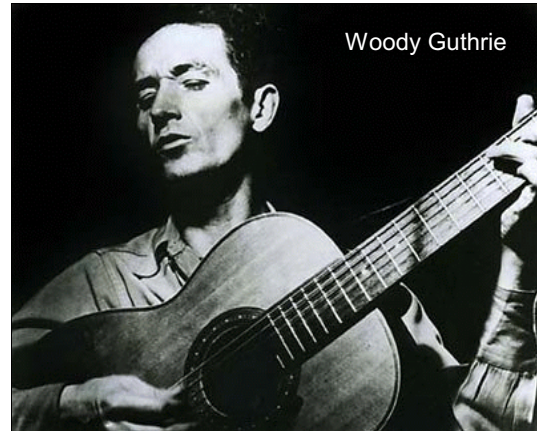
Joe Hill

[Note: Joe Hill was a Swedish immigrant and a professional provocateur who, according to American left-wing lore, was hanged by local authorities for his courageous stand against injustice on behalf of the downtrodden working class. From point of fact, he was executed for murdering two men, including a police officer. At the 1969 Woodstock music festival, folk balladeer Joan Baez momentarily resurrected the dormant memory of this early working class hero with her lilting rendition of “Joe Hill,” but few in the crowd had a clue who she was singing about.]

Left-wing protest music was not a factor in American popular music during the Roaring Twenties, but with the coming of the Great Depression dozens of songs related to the times were played on the radio and became hits. Some American leftists, along with their European counterparts such as Theodor Adorno, considered all commercial popular music to be bourgeois and counter-revolutionary, but others saw great potential in exploiting the medium for propaganda purposes. Still, American Communists generally looked at popular music with suspicion if not outright contempt. Popular music was mostly Broadway show tunes, formulaic Tin Pan Alley love songs or hyper-kinetic jazz, and most doctrinaire

Marxists dismissed the commercial music industry as just another capitalistic scam operation.

Instead, the American left preferred the socio/political folk-style music of performers such as **Woody Guthrie**, **Pete Seeger**, and the **Almanac Singers**. In their minds, folk music was the music of

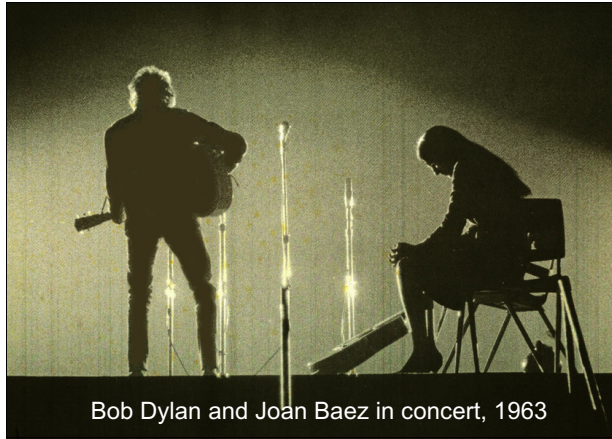


“The People” and therefore an “authentic” art form. Operating outside the commercial music industry, it was intrinsically a protest against capitalism. Furthermore, politicized folk music avoided the kind of “spurious harmony” – both thematically and musically – that hardcore Neo-Marxists like Adorno detested. Unlike slick commercial jazz and sentimentalistic love ballads sung by professional crooners, folk music was plain and unadorned. It featured simple instrumentation, and songs were sung (or in many cases, croaked, howled, wheezed, whined, growled or rasped) in a down-home style by singers with gloriously untrained voices. The “beauty” of the song was the message rather than the melody, the instrumentation or the vocals. Therefore, a warbler like Woody Guthrie could be hailed as a great singer and musician. In fact, he could not have sounded worse if he had been born without vocal cords, and his guitar-playing wouldn’t have suffered much had he been born with webbed fingers.



Pete Seeger

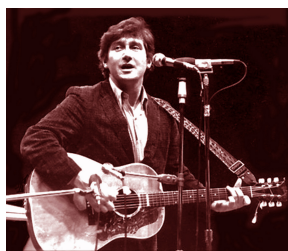
The folk song genre remained the preferred and officially-sanctioned medium for left-wing music into the 1960s. As a young music phenom, **Bob Dylan** mastered the genre and wrote some of the defining protest songs of the early Sixties such as “Blowin’ in the Wind,” “Masters of War,” “A Hard Rain’s A-gonna Fall,” and “The Times They Are A-changin’.”



Bob Dylan and Joan Baez in concert, 1963

But he soon grew tired of acoustic folk music because he found it too restrictive, and when he formed a rock band and went electric, folk purists such as Pete Seeger went ballistic. For Seeger and other left-wing purists, authentic political music *was* folk music, and they regarded Dylan as a commercial sell-out to the capitalistic music industry. This opinion didn’t last long, however, as other talented acoustic folk artists such as **Paul Simon**, **Joni Mitchell** and **Phil Ochs** also eventually branched out from the strict confines of traditional folk music.

By the late 1960s left-wing themes and influences had thoroughly infiltrated American pop culture in music, movies, the theater, literature, and even TV. As Walter Benjamin had foreseen, a Neo-Marxist agenda could very effectively be communicated to mass audiences through mass marketing and new technologies. If the ultimate goal was cultural infiltration and social change, concessions had to be made to the realities of contemporary lifestyles. In fact, being almost entirely consumer-driven and virtually devoid of quality control standards, there was not a medium more open and susceptible to left-wing propaganda than popular culture. Yet in subsequent decades a unique synthesis emerged, particularly in the field of popular music. Beginning with acid-rock and heavy metal, followed by the violent and nihilistic rantings of punk rock, rap and hip-hop, ugly music became normative as it was comfortably integrated into the mainstream pop music industry. As Michael Minnicino observed in his article, “The New Dark Age,” the disparate strategies for cultural subversion advocated by Benjamin and Adorno, which on the surface seem utterly contradictory, actually represent the coordination of “almost the entire theoretical basis of all the politically correct aesthetic trends which now plague our [society].” Remarkably, and regrettably, this has been an integral part of the whole Neo-Marxist agenda: the startling success of their sick and sinister subversion of American culture.



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Jeffrey D. Breshears, Ph.D., is a Christian historian, apologist, and the founder and president of The Areopagus, a Christian study center and education organization in Atlanta, Georgia.

JBreshears@TheAreopagus.org

