

## Canons, History, Capitalism: Some Mid-Career Reflections

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### On the Question of Canons

I have long thought that it is difficult to avoid creating a canon through teaching; one can only cover a finite number works or books in a particular course. And the more general kinds of courses—such as surveys for majors, one of which I teach—are perhaps the worst culprits, since they cover so much ground historically. This is not to say, of course, that canons are driven mainly by the exigencies of teaching and are free of ideological considerations, for they are no less ideological than anything else: early canons in musicology were not just male dominated, but exclusively male. I am old enough to remember when the great Hildegard von Bingen began to be taught with some regularity.

Yet the demands of teaching are real. My first experience teaching popular music was in 1994, and I am sure many readers encountered the same difficulties as I: there simply were not enough scholarly works on popular music to fill out a syllabus. So we read a good deal of studies of popular culture more generally that did not necessarily consider popular music, as well as Simon Frith's *Sound Effects*, Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil*, and a few others. In this period, because of the paucity of publications, I suppose there was a popular music studies canon, but it did not last long with the subsequent proliferation of books and articles on popular music. I continued to teach Frith's book for years, but finally had to give it up, not because the ideas were less stimulating or out of date (that book for me remains a treasure trove of great insights, whether about rock and sex, or the complicated folk/rock relationship in the 1960s), but because increasingly few students had any idea of the musicians in the book. Boney M? ABBA they tend to know, barely.

Now, every time I teach a course on popular music, the syllabi are quite different from each other. Finding myself in mid-career, pressed by many obligations as most tenured faculty are, I find that if I want to read something outside of summer "vacation," I assign it. So syllabi consist

mainly of a few classics and then newer publications that I am desperately seeking time to read.

What are those classics? I return again and again to the classics of theory: Marx, Weber, Bourdieu, some others. Interestingly, for a longtime Marxist, I find myself drawn more and more to Max Weber. Clifford Geertz remarked somewhere that *The Protestant Ethic* was a kind of miracle, and I am finally beginning to understand why: it is a model of sober scholarship, consisting of historicized arguments made without grandstanding or posturing, and without promoting themselves with fancy new terms (much like Geertz's own writings, speaking of classics). A work that argues simply that one must attempt to understand massive historical systems such as capitalism *historically* is an important corrective to much of what goes on in the name of Marxism today, and, for that matter, in most of the postwar twentieth century thanks to the Frankfurt School, which I think has been unduly influential on popular music studies (about which more below).

### **Where Is Popular Music Studies Going?**

I cannot predict the future but can offer some critiques of the present as a way of articulating where I hope popular music studies might go. Or, rather, one direction it might take.

Doubtless some Frankfurt School works would appear on some scholars' lists of works in the popular music studies canon, but for me, many of them—Theodor Adorno in particular—represent a set of perspectives that I find deeply and continually problematic. There is, first and foremost, the lack of historicization, and, more generally, a lack of engagement with the empirical, whether historical or ethnographic. Claims about what listeners or audiences want or like in the absence of what listeners or audiences actually say they think are troubling, then as now. While it can be a thrilling ride to see what comes out of these authors' heads, sometimes there is not much more to go on than that. There is also the problem, particularly in Adorno's writings, that points are made less by argumentation based on empirical research than by assertion emanating from Adorno's assumptions and biases.

The lack of historicization seems to be, in part, a reason for the dearth of studies of popular music before World War II relative to studies about more recent music. Going that far back would seem to necessitate reading old magazines, or spending time in archives, or what have you. My current long-term project, a history of music used in advertising from radio in 1920s to the present, has necessitated conducting a good deal of

research on pre-World War II music, and the absence of scholarship on this music has been striking (Taylor, *The Sounds of Capitalism*). Rudy Vallée, for example, the first mass-mediated popular music superstar, had been the subject of only one scholarly publication at the time I began my research, an article by C. Stewart Doty in the *Maine Historical Society Journal* entitled “Rudy Vallee: Franco American and Man from Maine” (since then, Alison McCracken’s useful “God’s Gift to Us Girls” was published).

I would hope to see a much greater engagement in the future with questions of what constitutes the objects of study in popular music studies, and what one can learn—and cannot learn—from the objects one chooses to study. One cannot “read” everything out of a popular song or its lyrics. Texts can tell us something valuable, but they cannot tell us everything of interest, such as their conditions of production, reception, and more. Archival, ethnographic, and other kinds of research are lacking in many recent studies I have seen; as are perusals of the popular press contemporaneous with the music one is studying. I am not arguing that it is only the big picture that matters, however; historicization does, as well. In general, I think I would (currently) align myself with a kind of updated Bourdieusian field of cultural production approach, which Randal Johnson, in his helpful introduction to Bourdieu’s *The Field of Cultural Production*, has characterized as one of “radical contextualization”—contextualization that of necessity involves not only textual analysis of works and those who make and perform them, but their conditions of production and reception (9).<sup>1</sup> And contextualization should not be understood as providing “context” to a “text”—texts do not “reflect” their social/historical/cultural origins but, rather, shape and are shaped by them (and here I am deliberately referring to Raymond Williams’s classic discussion of the problem of reflection in *Marxism and Literature*).

Engaging with classics of theory means engaging with the big picture. I have been struck (as I have written elsewhere) by how few scholars are dealing with capitalism anymore, with Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* a recent and important exception; and how globalization—which I view not as an autonomous development but as an aspect of our form of neoliberal capitalism—has become the dominant lens through which a good deal of scholarship operates.<sup>2</sup> Yet capitalism still matters, and analyzing music in and of capitalist culture still seems to me to be a worthwhile project.

Apart from the classics of theory, there is, of course, a good deal of theory being written today, to the extent that it seems to be impossible to

characterize the state of theory. Gone are the days when we were all reading theories of postmodernity, or postcolonialism, or, before that, Foucault, or Lévi-Straussian structuralism, or the (re)-discovery of Marx in the 1970s. The field of theory has become so fractured, trends so short-lived, that it is difficult to imagine a new classic emerging, though I hope I am mistaken. It thus seems to me to be ever more important to know the history of theory to be able to understand where today's trends are coming from, or if and how they are repackaging older ideas.

### The Present

So, what is good? It is good that we have popular music studies, which scarcely existed when I finished graduate school in the early 1990s. The explosion of cultural studies more generally, and popular music studies in particular (as well as many other new areas of study), has re-vitalized many a discipline, including the one in which I was trained, historical musicology.

And there are plenty of good popular studies by musicologists and ethnomusicologists and people trained in other fields. Recent favorites include works by Keila Diehl, Mark Katz, Brent Luvaas, Sunaina Maira, Louise Meintjes, Jonathan Sterne, Jeremy Wallach, Bob White, and many others who engage with the empirical in productive ways that are frequently theoretically sophisticated and intellectually provocative. I am thus optimistic about the future of popular music studies scholarship, whatever form it takes. I should say “forms” since a plurality of approaches seems to me to be a very healthy thing indeed.

### Notes

1. For some updating of Bourdieu in an American context, see Taylor, “Advertising and the Conquest of Culture.”
2. See Taylor, “Globalised Late Capitalism and the Commodification of Taste.”

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