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The Dialectics of Rock Music and Neoliberalism

Derek Block

Honors Thesis

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Dr. Eli Rubin – Committee Chair

Introduction

Just as labor's creations are beholden to the system which polices the surplus value created, art fundamentally becomes inherently intertwined by the relation of ownership the means of production the artist creates under. This fact becomes foundational to the information contained within the study of such art. Philosophical justification for the Enclosure Movement in 18th and 19th century England can be found in bourgeoisie and aristocratic commissioned paintings depicting villagers and farmers as natural forces out among the English countryside; God's gift to them for their own organization and service. The study of artistic movements of both the artists and audience relates the class relationship of the society through the artistic dialogue contained within the conclusions of such study.¹ Herein lies art's value to the material analysis of the production of culture. While artists' attempt to depict things as they are seen or felt, as humans working within the barriers of communication, their own desires alter or jade their expression of reality and so art becomes a tool to remake or understand the intentions and desires of entire societies and guide the development presently. However, the inverse is equally true, art is inherently warped by the perspective and capabilities of the viewer. Crucial to understanding Rock music's material role as an art form is an understanding of not only the history of the artists and their artworks but of also the historical context in which they were produced but also received. The foundational descriptors of Rock music have been disruption and rebellion. It has been reiterated countless times, and

¹ John Barrel, "Introduction," in *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1.

with pride, how anti-establishment it was, and, to a lesser extent, is. How could one of the West's greatest cultural achievements be mostly concerned about and associated with the failures and contradictions within Western society while also simultaneously decried in Soviet Bloc as Western propaganda and decadence?² How can Bob Dylan, an archetypal figure in a movement associated with anti-consumer attitudes, sell his entire catalogue some 50 years after the fact for \$400 million?³ Rock music and its enduring heritage existed and were perpetuated as a means for capital to sustain its own cultural revolution against an organized and coherent, materially driven Left bent on acquiring a stake in ownership. Capitalism as a mode of production inherently relies on the states monopoly of violence to secure its control over surplus value but also through guiding the development of culture. Certainly, a country founded out of a bloody bourgeoisie revolution understands the perpetual violence necessary to secure individual rights. Rock music and the enduring impact of its mythos created and fulfill a certain aspect of political violence equated to revolutionary action that has been a cornerstone in an ongoing cultural battle against coherent collective action. Capitalism has had an incredible feature of taking genuine expressions of oppression and injustice, neutering revolutionary spirit and organizing power, and in turn selling a shriveled and sterile product. Ultimately, Rock music can be seen as the symbolic religion and philosophic vanguard of the Baby Boom necessary to bring the mythical white proletariat through Vietnam and the final

² Danny Lewis, "When Rock Was Banned in the Soviet Union, Teens Took to Bootlegged Recordings on X-Rays: Teens snuck jazz and rock into the U.S.S.R. on records made of old x-rays" *The Smithsonian Magazine*, December 10, 2015.

³ Ben Sisario, "Bob Dylan Sells His Songwriting Catalog in Blockbuster Deal," *New York Times*, Dec 9, 2020.

crisis of 1970s into Neoliberal reforms which allowed the extenuating of super profits extracted from the growing empire abroad. The genesis of Rock music occurs at a moment of crisis in US history and ultimately because of this becomes a flexible embodiment of the counterculture movements of the era. Which then this fact takes on a certain aspect of political legitimacy through its popularization which then fundamentally replaces something akin to the sonic worship of religious ceremonies and their impacts on youth culture, supplanting the connective nature of musical performances with political conviction and directive. By offering the continued production and dissemination of the dissenting and politically charged music, under careful guidance and censorship, capitalist ruling powers effectively evaded any real resistance to the upward transfer of wealth taking place during the privatization of the 70s.

The Relationship with Communism and Early Folk Music

Acting as a lightning rod for revolutionary fervor and the reactionaries' boogeyman, the idea of Rock music, which when couple with other enduring myths from the era become crucial to convincing the populous to erode their wartime concessions in the interest of imperial conquest abroad. This work argues that this phenomenon was pivotal and, along with many cultural myths and explicit top-down sentiments forming at this time, was in fact necessary for being able to justify neoliberal reforms in response to the economic turmoil and growing domestic unrest of the late 60s and early 70s. The brilliantly flexible nature of capital co-opted the organizational power and anti-capitalist sentiment encoded within Rock music and replaced it with incoherent consumerism and existential ideology to disempower any clear attempt at resisting a massive reorganization away from the Keynesian welfare state, a culmination of working-class victories from the previous half-century. In essence the figures emerging from the

first generation of rock music, especially in the United States, become the prophets and guiding ethos of the rebellious but ultimately subservient reaction against the pivot away from hard fought economic concessions.

As the global powers destroyed themselves with the Great War, Tsarist Russia, still a periphery to European monarchist capital, collapsed into a communist revolution following the ideology of Karl Marx. The sustained existence of this dialectical and existential threat to the capital's power underscored the next 70 years of capital's development. The message was clear to ruling powers across the globe; revolution can and will happen anywhere its weeds are left untended. In fact, earlier in 1929, Henry Ford lost money on a venture selling his Model As and assembling line production methods to the Soviet Union believing introducing capitalism was the best way to undermine communism.⁴ However domestically, the looming threat of leftist power in otherwise capitalist nations caused reactionary concessions to the working class.

Dorthe Lewis recounts in the 1963 *Marxist Leninist Quarterly*:

To reflect sadly that the New Deal fooled the working class into believing that its aspirations could be realized under capitalism is to ignore a central fact. This was not deception. Most workers did not harbor revolutionary aspirations; they did not make demands the fulfillment of which obviously required a change in the system. Moderate as the New Deal reforms were, they won the allegiance of American workers so securely that even today a large number of them and their children are willing to fight an impossible war against socialism. In this way the New Deal helped to make the American working class susceptible to cold-war propaganda.⁵

⁴ David E. Greenstein "Assembling 'Fordizm': The Production of Automobiles, Americans, and Bolsheviks in Detroit and Early Soviet Russia." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, no. 2 (2014): 259–89.

⁵ Dorothy Lewis, "From the New Deal to the New Frontier" *Marxist-Leninist Quarterly*, (1963).

The New Deal, the FDR administration's concession in response to the turmoil caused by the Great Depression, was materially very moderate but did an immense deal in reshaping the material mechanisms of society which unfolded culturally. One of the more notable contributions was the Works Progress Administration (WPA) enacted in the spring of 1935.⁶ This redistribution of resources built through an employment program becomes an important factor in creating the artistic movements and zeitgeist necessary for the creation of Rock music. These reforms may have influenced society but did little to stem the rising tide of economic inequity, what it did was create a subservient managerial class and large bulwark of agencies which could direct the oncoming development of a volatile society.

Paramount to understanding the birth of Rock music as a cultural revolution and subsequent co-optation and use as an agent of maintenance for capital's control on society is understanding the Cold War context surrounding this time period and how much of that was dependent on a coordinated and systemic attempt to deride any semblance of anti-American, or challenging the status-quo, activity. In late 40s and early 50s the Cold War was beginning to get very serious. The Chinese Revolution in 1949 had just achieved victory under staunch communist chairman Mao Zedong, making China a massive communist ally in the far East. This worried US leaders as China is in close proximity to French Indochina Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. The Soviet Union broke the US monopoly on nuclear weapons in August of the same year, furthering anxiety as the communist presence continued to grow. In 1950 the

⁶ Don Adams and Arlene Goldbard, "New Deal Cultural Programs: Experiments in Cultural Democracy," *Adams & Goldbard* 1986, 1995.

Korean war broke out in response to the invasion of South Korea by the Northern Communists. Western nations had to continue developing a society which could withstand ideological attacks and still support the continued existence of the military industrial complex and expansion of the new imperial spheres of influence. The Cold War was an ideological battle abroad and domestically.

Enter the folk music fascination of 1930s and 40s New York; a crucial piece of understanding here is how the early efforts of the New Deal and Works Progress Administration provided the recordings and mythos which combined with the economic interests of the fledgling popular music industry and leftist organizers in 30s and 40s New York City. Historian Ron Eyerman points out that “The, rather ironic, aim of this modest form of state intervention into the arts was to preserve a portrait of a society whose current conditions, it was hoped, would soon disappear. An unintentional side-effect was the creation of an archive, if not a canon, of folk music that future generations and movements would draw upon.”⁷ Songs of rural Americans, Appalachians, African Americans, and various ethnic groups now found themselves circulating among urban and affluent Americans. These expressions held universal truth as sonic slices of rural American life which then translated into popular appeal. Archivists like John and his son Alan Lomax preserved a heritage of folk anthems; pieces of music which deliberately depicted life as real as possible. Songs from chain gangs alongside the road now became a powerful political force. McCarthyism and the early surveillance state then focused

⁷ Ron Eyerman and Scott Barretta, “From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States,” *Theory and Society* 25, no. 4 (1996): 503.

on popular figures in the movement, leading them to be harassed and plagued by communist allegations for the remainder of their careers. The early members of the folk revival presented a real and present danger, their music had an organizational effect which threatened aspects of the status quo and could hinder efforts fighting communism abroad.

An interesting note in this saga is how the growing record industry willingly aided in the popularization of traditional roots music based on the recordings from projects under the WPA. In the never-ending quest for profit small record companies turned around and sold copies of these grass roots recordings unwittingly feeding into a growing Left-wing movement using these musical contexts to rally and advance their causes. During the 1930s and 1940s, a small group of music production companies and musicians in and around New York City largely controlled the popular music industry. This central conglomerate of songwriters and music publishers dictated the trends and production of popular music from the late 19th century through mid-20th century eventually being nicknamed the Tin Pan Alley derived from using 'tin pan' as a term for a worn-in piano. Their initial fascination with and attempts to form a national identity through these grassroots genres came from the desire to capitalize on the overt patriotism on display during World War II. This trend exposed more subversive musicians to traditional songs of protest and critique. The initial folk revival grew beyond Tin Pan Alley's control and was used by communist activists and organizers to draw attention to their causes. In most cases, contrasting to the later folk revival of the 60s, the emphasis was not on "authentic" folk music but more heavily politized songs in the traditional folk sound. Eyerman explains:

Once folk music became accepted as an appropriate means of expression, the two central ways in which live folk music was spread during the latter 1930s were the

worker's chorus tradition, whose main effect was to accustom those on the left to folksong, and more importantly, through what Richard Reuss terms "the Alan Lomax school" of folk singing. The cohesiveness of the New York based circle gave added strength to an otherwise rather small folk-music movement, and it also afforded key individuals the role of gatekeeper: deciding over what is fit to be called "folk" music. Alan Lomax, more or less single-handedly, performed this task in the first wave of folk revival.⁸

The first Folk revival was a deliberate attempt at creating a proletarian movement based on the Folk music tradition but as the directions among international relations between Hitler and Stalin shifted to war, the communist sympathizer behind the Folk movement were now using their influence to sway opinion against fascism in Germany. With the fall of Nazi Germany and the start of the Cold War imminent Folk music, much like Leftist politics, faded rapidly for a stretch, the postwar economy seemingly unstoppable. A large part of this fading can also be attributed to government censorship increasing tenfold in the face of foreign communist threat. Richard Reuss notes, "artists in all fields of the American Communist movement began to call attention to the aesthetic qualities and social implications of the various forms of grassroots people's expression."⁹ Emphasis began to move away from class consciousness towards political correctness, an indicator for the direction of the New Left of the 60s.

This turn away from a hard proletarian stance was as much a move for leftist survival as it was for expanding markets. This, by definition, increased the range of available musical material, as well as the potential audience, but the intention of using "songs as weapons" in

⁸ Eyerman, "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," 518.

⁹ Richard A. Reuss, "American Folksongs and Left-Wing Politics: 1935-56." *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 12, no. 2/3 (1975): 94.

political struggle remained in place. Aristocratic leftists were able to expand what constituted a protest song and by doing cosigned every song to a protest song. Still, in 1955 Pete Seeger and a few other members of Lomax school of singing, most notable being Seeger's band The Weavers, their names being found in the infamous Blacklist, were brought in front of Congress to testify before the House Committee for Un-American Activities.

Institutionally, the central effect of the Blacklist was to remove from folk music the new forums it had gained and become rooted in following the collapse of the organized political left. Thus, in the 1950s, a folk-music underground could build in a relative organizational vacuum, being sustained by neither the commercial mass media and other conventional performance outlets, nor the organizational base and ideological glue of the Old Left. What emerged was a combination of new and old institutional forms that extended beyond the Old Left and toward the new.¹⁰

Folk music was not the main target of the committee, but the connection was formed in the public's mind and the aftereffects of McCarthyism would last well into the 60s.¹¹ The hearing did little to slow down the growing commercial success of the Folk movement as many musicians prioritized their paycheck over their proletarian values. It did, however, guide the following artists away from hardline Marxist inspired content and towards a more pastoral and authentic folk sound which tended to lean more into Country Swing music which provided some rhythm and wholesome vivaciousness which would later be replaced by Rock'n'roll, but that's getting ahead.

¹⁰ Eyerman, "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," 518.

¹¹ Milton Bracker, "6 MORE WITNESSES BALK RED INQUIRY: Hearing Over," *The New York Times*, August 19, 1955, pg. 1,6.

The lesson being learned the hard way, propagating, and peddling a commodity which criticized the very system which allowed its commodification was a dangerous game and could result in a loss of profit due to extensive harassment by authorities. Toning down lyrics and complying with regulations and generally acceptable standards became a viable lane for artistic expression and economic prosperity within an emerging national record industry. The domination and central control of popular music by Tin Pan Alley exercised a lesson on the natural progression of musical trends and how the methods of production inherently shape the resulting artistic movements and can be bottlenecked into directing nationwide trends and historical conceptions. The absorption of the Folk music tradition by communist sympathizers is where the societal obsession and historical myth begins that would later shape around Rock music and its subsequent deification later necessary for the extenuation of neoliberal capital.

The New Deal and Elvis

Inspired by Lomax's success and appreciation for American grass roots music, Sam Phillips launched his independent label later called Sun Records in 1950. Sun records would be a hub of musical innovation, but more so a hub of racial integration. In Memphis, Tennessee, Phillips became enamored with the sounds of rhythm, blues, and gospel he heard emanating from the backwoods of the deep South and the country twang and guitar skill drifting from the Appalachian Mountains. While the Folk revival turned into a rather privileged and elite activity becoming increasingly popular among white-college students after its brush up with communists Rock'n'roll was reaching into less desirable markets.

While rock and roll was later to become a genre whose practice transcended class boundaries, in the 1950s most of the cultural rebels performing in this genre were, like Elvis Presley, working-class southerners, and it was not until the mid- 1960s that the children of the middle class would widely take up this music as performers. Jazz, on the

other hand, was becoming increasingly self-referential and abstract during the 1950s, rendering it less and less accessible as a form of expression. Folk music thus offered a preferable alternative for some, lending itself readily to participation, while retaining an intellectual vitality, leftist or otherwise.¹²

Naturally markets had to expand and filling the void was Rock'n'roll. A precursor to Rock music, rock'n'roll shattered societal standards. Where folk music at least came from an attempt at creating a national identity and built upon "respectable" (took more inspiration from white culture than African American culture) traditions, Rock'n'roll threw caution to the wind. It was fast and wild, and it was young. Hailing directly from African American musicians influenced by gospel, blue, soul, the new sound again threatened a fragile society built on uneasy acceptance of looming destruction. Elvis, having the benefit of growing up around African American music, heralded the plight of cyclical poverty among African Americans in the deep south when he sang in the same way as his peers. His lyrics were not openly calling for a rebellion but to parents everywhere it spelled doom and looked like just another communist plot to undermine so-called social cohesion. Ironically, the draw to Rock'n'roll could be explained by a desire among younger Americans to belong to a community or group now absent among suburban life. In an effort to atomize society so as to avoid collective action, ruling parties drove more and more interest towards the fledgling movements.

Popular music, with Rock'n'roll at the forefront, was advancing at a steady rate. New recording technology, advancing production techniques, and increasing access to equipment

¹² Eyerman, "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," 518.

were all important for the music industry making tremendous strides in all sorts of direction so as to capture enough interest on the radio to warrant record sales. Sun Records was a small independent label recording African American music out of Memphis, Tennessee. Sun Records was far from alone in this aspect. The desire to capture genuine musical expressions had spread well beyond the first wave of folk revival and now encompassed more “darker” genres of music. Elvis was by far not the first or only rock’n’roll superstar, but his legend grew well beyond his musical contribution, and he became the archetypal star. Elvis’s first hit was just a cover of “That’s All Right (Mama)” written by legendary African American Blues artist Arthur “Big Boy” Crudup. His rocket to stardom drew quite the backlash and as he grew the fear Rock’n’roll would mutate into the end of the American way of life grew with him. However, this was quite the opposite. It could be reasoned the 50s saw the true death of the domestic Manifest Destiny and its lifeless corpse paraded around as a hollow promise. It's no historical revelation to suggest Rock’n’roll music grew in reaction to a fraudulent society but also allowed in part because of circumstances created by said society. The explosion of the middle class in the 50s brought on an increasingly alienating and atomizing culture which swept any failings of society under the rug: out of sight, out of mind. As society grew as accelerating rates, things simply got bigger: markets, institutions, businesses, governments, and so forth. Record companies were no exception; springing up and profiting anywhere people had ears and had the mind to buy records. The craze Elvis caused, and his other-worldly fame, also inspired scores of young people to chase the same.

At the core of capitalism is the commodity and record companies sold a commodity which directly eroded at the systems supporting private ownership. Self-censorship came from

the desire for profits. The first generation of politically charged artists struck a vein of profit in understanding the cohesive value of music, especially live performances. Before the postwar advances in recording equipment in distribution the performance was how artist afforded their living. With venues expanding it became much more precarious and threatening to profit to book subversive acts. Encoded dialectically in the commodity is the contradiction which explains the root criticism of capitalism. The first few years of the folk revival were marred and systemically policed for any subversive content. Leading musicians hauled up to testify before House and now the same people behind those early. The explosion of the middle class in the 50s brought on an increasingly alienating and atomizing culture which swept any failings of society under the rug: out of sight, out of mind. Already in motion the legislation leftover from the New Deal and several war time acts provided the perfect vessel to direct the incoming acceleration. The emergence of new media technologies and markets would be accelerated by the remnants of a subsided economy still under the patriotic spell of World War II. As society grew at unprecedented rates, the owning class would have to have to evolve in unprecedented ways. The decade following World War II would be spent continually convincing the public that communists and all associated with them were the enemy, an existential threat to everything sacred and good about American and by extension Western society. Large swaths of educated and disciplined GIs returning to the work force created a demand for space in an ever-shrinking market space of material prosperity. Any person unable to taste the upper echelon of society was told to examine their own faults.

The 50s was a decade of forced introspection for the mythical “white proletariat.” Elvis grew up in rural Mississippi among the descendants of sharecroppers. The music he heard and

laments of suffering and societal injustice, despite immense commercialization, remained visible throughout his career. The rise of Elvis, and by extension Sam Phillips Sun Records and many other record companies like it, signify the move in the record industry away from central points of control like Tin Pan Alley and Lomax out of New York and out across continent. The continual need for profit and move away from orthodox Marxist themes was manifesting itself in a more “authentic” version of what it perceived as American music and authorities once again saw potential danger. With racial tensions at their highest point since reconstruction and the previous African Americans immigration North the preceding decades, the popularity of Rock’n’roll was symbiotic with the budding Civil Rights movement. As pressure mounted against racial integration it spilled over into Rock’n’roll. Topical and protest Folk songs at least had the benefit of sounding “white” and rarely translated over into sexual deviancy, but the racial origins of the genre gave it a certain subversive aura which when contrasted with the backwards political views of leaders from the deep South inflamed the popularity of the music. The old-world attitudes, from both the left and right, seemed trivial and absurd, while moving and grooving felt right, at least to young people. Rock’n’roll may have been influenced by the sounds of certain regions, but it became a universal language understood to trade in the somber reality of Cold War America for a little bit of rhythm and blues. The role of revolutionary LARPer from the early leftist American movements had to wrestle with the fact that “Euro-American workers as a whole were a privileged labor stratum. As a labor aristocracy it had, instead of a proletarian, revolutionary consciousness, a petit-bourgeois consciousness

that was unable to rise above reformism.”¹³ The main premise of Maoist historian J. Sakai work *Settlers* stated previously is crucial to understanding the role Rock music would play in the forthcoming economic transition. While the first folk revival was an extension of the Old Left which saw the “white proletariat” as the valid revolutionary actor, the theft of African American expressionism through Rock’n’roll is the first indication of the third-world Maoist view American related in the Sakai quote above coming into question. In searching for a national sound and identity, the progenitors of the first folk revival, through the New Deal, would inevitably stumble across artistic expressions which exposed the harsh realities the material history of the United States. One that was built first by conquering and erasing the native American cultures and then trans-Atlantic slave trade and continual subjugation and exploitation of minorities. In Elvis and the subsequent widespread popularity of Rock’n’roll, the masses would find their first attempt at coping with this harrowing collective realization.

From Dylan Going Electric to the New Left.

Bob Dylan is probably one of the most written about musical artist of the last century and he has only been making music for half of it. Growing up in Hibbing, Minnesota, Dylan was a product of the first folk revival and popularity of Elvis and its lasting consequences. Understanding Dylan is understanding the generational gap underscoring the transition of society occurring during the 60s. With the explosion of the middle class came the emergence of the youth markets. Part of the reason why Elvis was such a nationwide phenomenon was the fact that economic prosperity now allowed teenagers a bit of economic freedom apart from

¹³ J. Sakai, *Settlers: Mythology of the White Proletariat* (Chicago: Morningstar Press, 1989), 24-5.

their family and subsequently gave them the freedom of expression through commodification.

It became very easy to tap into the widespread discontent and exhaustion in the search for profits. This did not only occur with Rock'n'roll but at various stages for different cultural institutions. Rebellion was in vogue. When recounting the inspiration Dylan drew from historian Daniel Wolff writes:

... he was studying Hollywood's version of rebellion, he was tuning his radio to the sounds of Elvis Presley, Buddy Holly, and the man he called his first idol, Hank Williams. Maybe that's how he ran away from home: by identifying with outlaws, the ones who somehow escaped the "shallow death."¹⁴

Dylan, like so many others, resonated deeply with the growing sentiment away from traditional society. If the 50s was a conservative decade which tried to form a new modern American identity the 60s would see a wholesale rejection of the purposed ideological purity. Millions of young Americans effectively turned into activists overnight.

While rock and roll was later to become a genre [Rock Music] whose practice transcended class boundaries, in the 1950s most of the cultural rebels performing in this genre were, like Elvis Presley, working-class southerners, and it was not until the mid-1960s that the children of the middle class would widely take up this music as performers... Folk music thus offered a preferable alternative for some, lending itself readily to participation, while retaining an intellectual vitality, leftist or otherwise.¹⁵

With Elvis being drafted in '59 and the initial novelty and intrigue with American Rock'n'roll fading while a more liberal interpretation of Rock'n'roll was growing in the UK, the rural and pastoral nature of the songs from the folk revival was growing in popularity again. At the

¹⁴ Daniel Wolff, *Grown Up Anger: the Connected Mysteries of Bob Dylan, Woody Guthrie, and the Calumet Massacre of 1913*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 21.

¹⁵ Eyerman, "From the 30s to the 60s: The Folk Music Revival in the United States," 522.

forefront of every political conscious teen was writing a song so powerful the old-world would crumble under its weight. Yet the rise of a new consumer-oriented mass society, the divisiveness of the Cold War, and the ravages of McCarthyism, the power of this "Old" Left to define the parameters of American radicalism had declined significantly, if not entirely disappeared. Dylan entered Greenwich Village in 1961 idolizing the "sources" and "informants" the first Folk revival used as the material for their inspiration. Dylan saw himself as Woody Guthrie reincarnate with the benefit of having experienced the liberating work of the Beat poets. Toting what was to be seen as a more authentic and less manufactured approach to use of songs in political protest.¹⁶ However, Dylan was not a virtuoso when it came to crafting elegant and complex musical compositions, his strength laid within his lyrics. Dylan was methodical in his poetic approach to lyrical content. The Beat poets of the 50s, centered a continent away in San Francisco, were instrumental in shifting intellectual attitudes away from the core of collective activism among the Old Left towards the coming freedom of expression of the New Left and Counterculture movements.¹⁷ Dylan also had the benefit of coming out seemingly nowhere just as Guthrie had done for the early Folk revival. He crafted an image of a well-worn and seasoned radical, shifting from persona to persona contained within his critical lyrics. Dylan personifies the shift towards intellectual movements heralded by the individual, his

¹⁶ Richard Reuss, "Woody Guthrie and His Folk Tradition," *The Journal of American Folklore*, July – September 1970, Vol. 83, No. 329, 273-303.

¹⁷ Timothy Hampton, "Absolutely Modern: Dylan, Rimbaud, and Visionary Song," *Representations* 132, 2015, 1-21.

persona embodies the plight of the “white proletariat” while his lyrics are the manifesto. Dylan expert Timothy Hampton relates:

Indeed, the two phenomena—the performing identity and the style of the lyric—are two sides of the same coin. The rambling boy is the thematic embodiment of the poetic technique shaping Dylan’s lyric style. Dylan’s composite lyricism, drawing on both working-class American idioms and “exotic” imported song forms, is the manifestation, at the level of form, of his mercurial persona, and vice versa. It is impossible to say which one generates the other.¹⁸

In 1965 Dylan, in his typical fashion, would use his position as an established folk artist to subvert the dominating trends once again by plugging in his guitar and performing for a crowd expecting folk ballads. As Steve Waksman observes, the “electric guitar came to embody a certain set of countercultural desire that hinged upon the transference of racial and sexual identity between African American and white men.”¹⁹ When Dylan plugged in his guitar at the Newport Folk festival, he was met with boos and hisses. Dylan, and folk music, still existed within an elitist framework hinged on the ideas of “authentic” and by accepting the forward sounding noise the electric guitar emitted, played the pivotal role in the dawn of Rock music. Music historian Kathryn Lofton relates the fact as: “To watch Tampa Red play the guitar, the white gaze could see power, but it was a power dangerously displaced. To watch Dylan, technical power to rule through their individual mastery.”²⁰ Despite the initial backlash, Dylan

¹⁸ Timothy Hampton “Rambling Boy: “Protest” and the Art of Adaption,” in *Bob Dylan: How the Songs Work*, (New York: Zone Books, 2019), 50-51.

¹⁹ Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience*. (Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

²⁰ Kathryn Lofton, “Dylan Goes Electric: Religion and Race in Rock’s Secularizing Event,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, 2021, 31–50.

persisted in forging the new genre and pushing the boundaries, an abomination to the waning purists and a visionary to acquainted. Perhaps just as important to the development of Rock music, Dylan also introduced the early Beatles to marijuana but also more importantly to his poetic and mystifying approach to songwriting.

The Beatles, and other bands associated with the British invasion, all idolized the first generation of American rockers like Elvis, Buddy Holly, and so on. As mentioned earlier, the cohesive and long existing national identity associated with European cultural production insulated many British musicians from the derogatory scrutiny American musicians experienced. Until The Beatles first American tour, they produced inventive and exciting reproductions of their American counterparts. Yet, up until that fateful smoke session with Dylan, the majority of advancement occurred sonically not topically for The Beatles. Making early use of dissonance and unorthodox musical composition, The Beatles reached unfathomable fame before even really considering more introspective songs. The legend goes that Dylan expressed how he enjoyed The Beatles music but ultimately was disappointed that many of the songs said nothing greater than the explicit content of their lyrics. After this cosign, all bets were off and The Beatles embarked on a creative journey which still warrants the astronomical volume of discussion being held on it.²¹ In fact, many music historians place The Beatles as the greatest band of all-time, a band of four friends from working class Liverpool inspired by Americans roots music. Their fame would only peak with their disbandment but squarely placed atop both the popular music scene, only rivaled by Motown, and as the

²¹ Joe Taysum, "How Bob Dylan influenced The Beatles' Songwriting," *Far Out Magazine*, March 18, 2021.

vanguard of the counterculture's Rock music. Dylan's influence on The Beatles squared the UK Rock music scene with the American one and is largely pointed to as the shifting point towards the blending of countercultural narrative that forms around the late 60s and Rock music.²²

Rock music combined the political conscious formed around the Folk and scene and through Dylan engrossed itself in the racial ignorance of Rock'n'roll to birth Rock music. Simon Firth, perhaps one of the first Rock music historians, relates:

"The rock claim was that if a record or performance had, in itself, the necessary signs of authenticity, then it could be interpreted, in turn, as the sign of a real community - the musical judgement guaranteed the sociological judgement rather than vice versa. There was no need to prove an independent, non-musical description of the rock 'community,' nor to describe how such a community came to make music for it was at issue was a set of musical conventions."²³

In fact as early as 1970, Jon Landau in his influential role as reviews editor and house theorist of *Rolling Stone* claimed Rock music as Folk to distinguish it from the rest of pop: rock was popular music that was not derived by Old-Left values, that did not fake emotion for electoral sympathy yet retained its political edge. Folk, in its political nature, did not describe musical production but musical values, these values were now derived from a critique of commercialism over capitalism: the active, collective, and honest intention behind folk music was, in fact, an idealized response to the experience of mass consumption typified as fragmented, passive, alienating.²⁴ As Rock grew more and more popular it had a harder time hiding from itself and

²² Elijah Wald, "Dylan Goes Electric! Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night That Split the Sixties (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).

²³ Simon Firth, "'The Magic That Can Set You Free': The Ideology of Folk and the Myth of the Rock Community." *Popular Music* 1 (1981): 159–68.

²⁴ Jon Landau "Rock 1970: It's Too Late to Stop Now," *The Rolling Stone*, December 10, 1970.

became increasing self-referential. The very thing which prompted Rock music's explosive popularity, the anti-establishment attitudes and subversive nature, now had to be kept up by musicians or risk being labeled a "sell-out" forever at odds with the economic system that earns their exploiters profit. Musicians, popular or otherwise, now had an obligation to laden their music with political or cultural critiques, even a simple love song should at least discuss gender relationships. Marxist theorist Theodore Adorno writes on the role of popular music and pseudo-individualization at work here although referencing the history of Jazz:

In the sphere of luxury production, to which popular music belongs and in which no necessities of life are immediately involved, while, at the same time, the residues of individualism are most alive there in the form of ideological categories such as taste and free choice, it is imperative to hide standardization. The "backwardness" of musical mass production, the fact that it is still on a handicraft level and not literally an industrial one, conforms perfectly to that necessity which is essential from the viewpoint of cultural big business. If the individual handicraft elements of popular music were abolished altogether, a synthetic means of hiding standardization would have to be evolved. Its elements are even now in existence.²⁵

As Rock music transcended its countercultural label and entered the popular arena it had to undergo a self-regurgitation in which commodification is shrouded among the illusion of choice and freedom of expression. The "backwardness" Adorno refers to is equal to the ironic nature of rockstars and their economic prosperity. The Beatles joked privately in studio sessions about writing a new swimming pool but publicly denounced the evils of consumer culture and as the Beatles became the standardization of Rock music Adorno then argues:

²⁵ Theodor Adorno, "On Pop Music," in *Culture Theory and Popular Culture* 2nd edition., ed. John Stokely (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 203.

By pseudo-individualization we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself. Standardization of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualization, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or "pre-digested."²⁶

For Adorno the standardization of jazz completes itself through developing a certain cultural language which creates contextual understanding between musicians allowing them to feign improvisation to the audience while in reality still following patterns predetermined ahead of time. The first half of this work has related how economic history converged on emerging popular music trends and advances in production technology to coalesce into a pseudo-individualized standardization of Rock music. The history of the genre also relates how it became "pre-digested" with a revolutionary flavor. This reorganization and shift in the late 60s was incredibly instrumental downstream as reactions to the counterculture would unfold and provide the ideological justification for present circumstances. A large part of this was the use of covers by artists. Updated and white renditions of foundational blues, country, and other roots genres topped the charts and rounded out countless protest musicians' catalogs among topical songs and original pieces. As Rock grew increasingly self-referential and continually flexible in its definitions, a Rocker could cover a country song from the 40s and because they sped up the tempo or reversed gender roles, the songs took on socially weaponized qualities extended beyond music itself but also contained within them the reactions against the growing influence of Rock music, essentially creating a self-referential loop of debasement.

²⁶ Adorno, 'On Pop Music,' 204.

Impressionable Youth and the CIA

As youth culture spread and translated to seas of cash markets, a cyclical pattern would develop predicated on “edginess.” If an artist could enflame the proper channels of power with their work, it would translate to a credibility and extended marketability. As the generational gap began to look more and more like a canyon this became increasingly easier to do. One of the rudimentary facts about studying a transformational period is the inherent misinterpretation of the younger generation. Perhaps the most far-reaching impact of the generational gap was felt among leftist circles. In a review of literature from the period discussing this, sociologist William Sprinrad relates how the “shallowness of the conformist culture, the urge to assert both authentic personalist and genuine communal values likewise had intellectual encouragement. Furthermore, there was some vigorous political activism around two types of issues, opposition to militaristic policies and civil rights, which, in terms of both objectives and forms of activism, supplied an influential model for the new radicalism.”²⁷ The formation of the New Left is a well-documented historical turn among progressive economic forces which shifted the organizational capabilities of the Western Left away from orthodox Marxist thought. It is impossible to nail down one specific cause which prompted this turn, its more than likely and number of factors mentioned but one undeniable factor was the CIA. Emerging from spy networks established by the OSS during WWII, the CIA was the “man

²⁷ William Sprinrad, “Review of Assessing the 1960s,” by Todd Gitlin, Tom Hayden, and James Miller. *Sociological Forum* 5, no. 3 (1990): 511–16.

behind the curtain” operating with very little oversight and an unholy vendetta against communism and any shred of orthodox Marxism. The most well-known front was the Congress for Cultural Freedom (CCF) but the full extent of clandestine involvement by intelligence agencies is only now fully being brought to light as documents become declassified. Francis Stonor Saunders, British historian, recounts in her groundbreaking work *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* writes: “Unchallenged, undetected for over twenty years, America’s spying establishment operated a sophisticated, substantially endowed cultural front in the West, for the West, in the name of freedom of expression. Defining the Cold War as a ‘battle for men’s minds’ it stockpiled a vast arsenal of cultural weapons; journals, books, conferences, seminars, art exhibitions, concerts, awards.”²⁸ Saunders book from which this quote is pulled from, focuses on the European aspects of the CIA’s efforts. However, through front organizations like the philanthropic organizations such as the Ford Foundation and the Rockefeller Foundation the CIA funded the widespread appeal of abstract expressionism. This covert interjection into the “free market of ideas” so typical of ruling classes has many historical precedents but this instance permeated every aspect of society. The Free Speech Movement kicked off at UC Berkely mid-decade was a direct descendant of the ideology covertly working throughout the intelligence agencies at the behest of Mont Pelerin Society, or the cult of aristocratic wizards behind global push for neoliberal reorganization. A large effort has been made to cast the CIA as a boogeyman which was concerned with the esoteric mind control

²⁸ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*, (New York: The New Press, 2000), pg. 4.

techniques and literal psychic warfare, but the actual impact of the CIA on Western culture was much more benign than literal brainwashing.

Typically characterized as a conservative state organ the CIA was anything but during this time. In ensuring the growth of capital and the extenuation of its powers against the growing Soviet regime, the CIA became the vanguard of liberalism and “American values” or particularly the freedom of expression one. This push, whether entirely fabricated or not, towards abstract expressionism and an “open society” had tendrils in every facet of society. Rock music with its pseudo-individualization, became the champion vehicle of deliverance for this cultural shift. The CIA also has an impressive record of placing assets within countercultural and Leftist movements effectively creating controlled opposition. Insinuating the CIA might have had a rockstar or two on their payroll is anything but a stretch. Just as many radical cells from this era would be infiltrated and monitored from the inside with the more extremists being killed under suspect circumstances and their efforts with them, the music industry was likely a victim of this as well. From Fred Hampton to MLK, a specific effort was made domestically against movements led by people of color which threatened private ownership.

Marxism became a cultural term as opposed to a scientific method of interacting with history. As Rock established itself on the edge of culture it became paramount to artists and businessmen alike to stay one step of moral trends based on the liberal ideas of self-expression and freedom and Marxist thought had been the guiding light for the West’s existential enemy: communism. With the biting teeth of the philosophy removed, an argument for collective ownership of the means of production, the New Left could capitalize on the trend of commodifying the panic associated with the word. Whether disintegrating established musical

creation like Paul McCartney and Brian Wilson or scoring ideological points through inflammatory lyrics like John Lennon and Bob Dylan, being new, fresh, and an associated with the fringes of cultural Marxism became counterculture's formula for success.

Cultural Reactions among the Late 60s and their Downstream Tributaries in the 70s.

Among an alarming number of political assassinations and state endorsed murders, the Civil Rights movements, growing economic inequality among increasingly saturated labor markets, the United States was beginning to expand the conflict in Vietnam. The Vietnam War in the grand scheme of modern American history has no other equal formative events. The cultural myths which, through Rock music, grew from the conflict drastically shaped the face of domestic politics. There has always existed an anti-war section within American politics but with Vietnam it was the first time the incessant war machines propaganda drum was overpowered by popular opinion. This rift and subsequent downstream reactions still largely shape the cultural zeitgeist today. As the media apparatus dominate today began to expand Vietnam was the first war which had combat footage and live coverage accessible to the public in an unprecedented way. The antiwar movement grew to reside in almost every corner of the country and despite continual growth, the war continued at accelerating rates. This blatant contradiction would fuel even more public distrust and anger with the state, galvanizing both sides and eventually culminating in the release of the Pentagon Papers. A limited hangout most likely disclosed by progressive factions among the intelligence community, the press release confirmed the publics greatest fear, the government had been shielding the true situation in Vietnam for years now. By this point the first generation of rock musicians had made a name

for themselves railing against the injustices of segregation and racism and onset of the military industrial complex. These musicians now either held on to their convictions, forsaking commercial success, and fleeing to bohemian lifestyles reliant on touring and performance money like The Grateful Dead, or they embraced abstract expressionism and sought to advance their artistic merit via ingenious musical evolution or devolution in increasing degeneracy. This requirement to always ride the edge or fade into obscurity or even worse: be branded a sell-out, kept Rock music and musicians at the ideological forefront of society.

One of the most popular methods of sharpening the edge of Rock songs was referencing recreational drug use. As mentioned earlier, The Beatles experimenting with marijuana under Dylan's influence was representative of a generational exposure to chemical manipulation and expression. The beginning of highly volatile domestic relationship with drug use in the United States is foundational to understanding the parallel and symbiotic role Rock music and the anti-war movements played in the development of Neoliberal policies through the New Left.

The antiwar movement, lumped in with other countercultural movements, represented a problem for US leaders. A part these various movements were easy to control but with Vietnam bridging the gap between popular movements society was perched for complete anarchy. The grip of anticommunist propaganda began to loosen, and another boogeyman had to be created to solidify an empire supporting population. With a shrinking news cycle, the coverage of Vietnam which caused so much popular support for anti-war effort now offered the solution. Moral panic was rather easily spread throughout proper civilization and could be wielded by leaders to justify just about any theft. As the antiwar moment filled its rank with returning GIs, it only solidified opposition to the war. However, the visibility and credibility of

the veterans also made them valuable political entities. Hawks accused the antiwar movement as betraying their countrymen, beholden to foreign communists. The myth that Vietnam veterans returned to unsavory receptions and ostracization back in the States would later be instrumental in the Regan campaign's first victory. More importantly though, the soldiers conduct itself became the target of attack. Desperately seeking for political cover, the War on Drugs would evolve from the myth of the addicted soldier. Rock music provided the perfect vehicle to amplify an existing problem. Sociologist Paul Starr wrote in his 1974 book titled *The Discarded Army* that by the late 1960s "acid rock, drugs and peace emblems were as common in I-Corps as they were in California."²⁹ Starr makes note of how US soldiers still kept up with the trends associated with the counterculture movements of the 1960s and 70s and where drug use was inexplicitly intertwined. The connection between the antiwar movement and other counterculture movements arose naturally as both the troops in Vietnam and members of countercultures across America occupied largely the same age demographic and economic background, an important note. Historian Christian G. Appy recounts that "...those who fought and died in Vietnam were overwhelmingly drawn from the bottom half of the American social structure."³⁰ This fact would help create a stigma surrounding veterans that when they returned, they would be poor, harmful, and now drug addicted members of society. If the

²⁹ Paul Starr, *The Discarded Army: Veterans After Vietnam - The Nader Report on Vietnam Veterans and the Veterans Administration* (New York: Charterhouse, 1975), 23, 36.

³⁰ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War* (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 23.

counterculture had penetrated and was eroding at the highest US institution, the military, then what was left.

The popularity of rock music and its increasingly drug-laden image was necessary to illicit support for starting the War on Drugs. As Rock music enshrined a new moral code of ethics based on liberalism within the youth it provided the justification for reactionary measures of control. If the communist guerilla was the enemy abroad, the drug user was their ally domestically and Rock music their mouthpiece. All these factors come together during the fallout of the 60s to form the ideological basis of the Neoliberal method of capital accumulation. Historian David Harvey writes that Neoliberalism is "...a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade."³¹ In the decade following the birth of Rock music, the implementation of Neoliberal policy would reshape the global economy away from the Keynesian model. This shift was a massive reorganization of capital prompted by the continual desire for imperial super profits. By massively expanding the police state domestically and intervening overtly and covertly, the leaders of the US economy began disassembling domestic production and offshoring labor to developing markets. The New Left, under the guiding principles of Rock music, had become disinterested with the plight of labor and fully embraced the ideals which would become contained with Neoliberalism.

³¹ David J. Harvey, "A Brief History of Neoliberalism," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.

Neoliberal Policy to Arena Rock.

The coffee shops, bars, and other seedy venues which provided the setting for the folk revival and rock music's birth were very much a product of the economic prosperity felt during and after the war. In the wake of suburbanization and white flight post war, American cities became the hub of the countercultures which middle America could safely observe and cast votes accordingly. With cities impoverished and ripe for plundering the urban home of Rock music was directly under attack. Perhaps the best way to understand the Neoliberal shift is by understanding how medieval burghers usurped aristocratic power through wielding specialized labor. If the monarchs need for specialized labor afforded the conditions for the formation of the bourgeoisie, the need for bankers among American businessmen allowed for the Neoliberal revolution. As US producers outpaced markets a financial crisis was imminent, and New York City would be the defining engagement in the oncoming onslaught of neoliberalism. Harvey explains:

The ruling elites moved, often fractiously, to support the opening up of the cultural field to all manner of diverse cosmopolitan currents. The narcissistic exploration of self, sexuality, and identity became the leitmotif of bourgeois urban culture. Artistic freedom and artistic license, promoted by the city's powerful cultural institutions, led, in effect, to the neoliberalization of culture.³²

As the privatization of the economy unfolded in New York, Rock music became increasingly intertwined with the spread of Neoliberalism. As Adorno relates: "The frame of mind to which popular music originally appealed, on which it feeds, and which it perpetually reinforces, is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention. Listeners are distracted from the demands of

³² Harvey, "A Brief History of Neoliberalism," Pg. 47.

reality by entertainment which does not demand attention either.” Once Rock music became a thing to itself after the late 60s, increasingly separated from the events it built its subversive aura on it still fully retained the qualities it acquired from the aforementioned history and was able to supplant a theoretical communist takeover by “...the fact that the detail remains openly connected with the underlying scheme so that the listener always feels on safe ground. The choice in individual alterations is so small that the perpetual recurrence of the same variations is a reassuring signpost of the identical behind them.”³³ Adorno’s words, referencing the jazz culture of the 20s and 30s, now directly applied to function of Rock music within American society. The splintered and fragmented remains of the initial popularity of the New Left was hopelessly unarmed to resist the oncoming onslaught of privatization and reforms. These reforms specifically meant to retract the previous half century of economic concessions from the owning class won by the collective action of workers across the continent. For the UK, it played a largely similar role but with a deeper institutional class consciousness it was less of a defining characteristic of UK’s institutional left reaction to the Neoliberal shift.

The most scientific explanation for this can be found in the historical roots music which inspired that first generation of aristocratic leftist prompting the first folk revival and later the obsession with Elvis and his “black” music through Sakai’s critique of American class consciousness mentioned earlier. The American Experiment is a rogue British Colony which built its economic station by wiping out native populations and using slave labor from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which is now being extenuated through the opening of labor markets

³³ Adorno, ‘On Pop Music,’ 204

of the Third World. The resulting historical revisions have clouded this fact and created a mythological “White Proletariat.” This Maoist view gives a certain perspective to the popularity of Elvis and the sources of his inspiration. Elvis mimicking African American performers may have been originally in good faith from his personal perspective, but the artist’s intention does not determine the audience’s reception of the work. The most glaring example is Led Zeppelin. Habitually glorified by Rock music historians and fans alike as the paramount of classic Rock. The first real “supergroup” of the budding Rock era, videos of their virtuoso level performances to seas of crowded stadiums take on a different historical context understanding the direct imitations of African American artists now adored by seas of white folk.³⁴ These scenes scratched an itch among many white Americans which help ease the burdens and justify the coming economic theft. Harvey writes “... neoliberal theory of technological change relies upon the coercive powers of competition to drive the search for new products, new production methods, and new organizational forms. This drive becomes so deeply embedded in entrepreneurial common sense, however, that it becomes a fetish belief: that there is a technological fix for each and every problem.”³⁵ Rock became the technological solution to the theoretical problem of workers achieving collective ownership.

Conclusion

At the very heart of all capitalist theory of control is separation. Individuals owning the means of production must not only separate the worker from the creations of their labor but

³⁴ Tim Coffman, “The First Led Zeppelin Album not to Feature Any Covers,” *Far Out Magazine*, February 10, 2023.

³⁵ Harvey, “A Brief History of Neoliberalism,” pg. 69.

also separate the workers from themselves, either completely or within manageable collectives which are easily eroded at the slightest sign of threat. Neoliberal capitalism has proven exceptional at this feat. The first instance of neoliberal reform being New York City is no coincidence. The working-class victories which built a vibrant and diverse community, heavily influenced by the Great Migration of African Americans North away from the South following the Civil War, was possible due to the public spaces offered through early leftist reforms such as the New Deal. These had to be erased from the collective memory and replaced with the songs mourning and shrouding the great dialectic struggle. While the US built the largest army the world has ever seen the people had to be given a dangling set of left-leaning keys pulling them ever so slightly enough to let the American ruling establishment have its way with economic policy both abroad and domestically. The first generation of bankers who saw record windfall profits from privatization saw themselves as the rock stars of financial sector, tearing down the old world and championing expressive economic freedom, but only for a select few. Rock music has proved vital in keeping the regenerative cycle of death in the American economic model ideologically sound to those who participate and viable to those it benefits. Altogether Marxists have struggled to understand the role art plays within the revolutionary struggle. With popular music, it must be understood that it still requires that it be consumed, leading to commodification. What change this work would position to musically concerned Marxist is this: the capitalist control of popular music arises from their control of finished product which is then wielded as an ideological weapon because the sentiment gets frozen within the commodification of song. If Marxists are to use music as weapon themselves, it must be lucid and participatory. Early Folk was used by leftists in the 30s and 40s because it brought people

together to experience the creation of music which was then used to introduce them unorthodox systems of thought. Keeping in mind how music brings people together, Marxists should focus on musical production to expand the reach of their method. Rock music, despite its historical purpose, got several things right: everyone can create music regardless of talent and frankly they should. In teaching musical creation to others, the Marxist can not only build bridges within a community but also through the labor involved in the musical process explain how these beautiful creations are stripped from the laborer in an economic system designed to do just that. The music being created needs no communist commissar or capitalist puppet master, it simply needs to be created. Music for music's sake can be a connective force unparalleled in emotional response and outright denial of this by Marxists would be a strategic blind spot.

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