

INTRODUCTION: "CORPORATE AMERICA AND GANGSTER RAP...."

After I included 2 songs by Ice Cube on "My Soundtrack For The BLM Movement," a lot of people felt he betrayed the Movement by secretly meeting with the Trump administration, which, subsequently, resulted in that administration portraying him as one of their supporters.

Since I did recommend his music, I felt it is **MY DUTY** to explain how a person, such as Cube, can go from an inspiration to a cause to a, willing or unwilling, shill for its opposition. Therefore, I am posting a revision of an essay, "Corporate America And Gangster Rap, A Destructive Combination," that I originally wrote in Dec. 2019, for the Harvard Blackletter Law Journal--which "challenge anti-Blackness, participate in activism around knowledge production, & engage in collective struggle for liberation."

CORPORATE AMERICA AND GANGSTER RAP, A DESTRUCTIVE COMBINATION?

America likes to suck the cool from Black boys to sell their products, then criminalize these boys for looking like the ads they've created. (Unknown)

This irrefutable statement, which I heard from a woman on KPFA, a progressive SF Bay area public radio station, is the quintessence of a long history of American capitalism subjugating the fruits of Black people's labor & culture for profit. Here, she was specifically referring to the corporate appropriation of the most powerful culture in the world, hip hop.

This began in the late 80's, when hip hop was the pure, unadulterated voice of the streets--represented by Ice Cube's NWA, & of Black rebellion--represented by Chuck D's Public Enemy ("P.E."). During this time, both NWA & P.E. had shook the power structure to it's core with their classic songs, "Fuck The Police," & "Fight the Power," respectively. However, despite P.E.'s messaging being more universally popular at the time--which was evident by the omnipresence of African medallions & Malcolm X hats--Corporate America chose to financially back the gangster rap culture. Why?

First, after initially passing on rap music as a fad, they discovered its high profit margin; therefore, they wanted in on it. Besides that, they had a more insidious motivation, which was to co-opt it in order to ensure a self-destructive mind-set wins out over a self-empowerment mind-set. In his

book, City of Quartz, Mike Davis aptly documents NWA's complicity in this:

But one of the most persistent 'truths' that NWA report is **their own avarice**: "We're not making records for the fun of it, we're in it to make money." In contrast to their N.Y. Rap counterparts, P.E. ... who are tribunes of Black Nationalism, L.A. gangster rappers disclaim all ideology **except the primitive accumulation of wealth by any means necessary**. ... Surrounded by benignly smiling white record company execs & PR men, NWA brandish customized assault rifles & talk darkly about recent 'drive-bys' & funerals of friends-- **a polished image like any other business**.

(Davis, 2006, pp. 86-7.)

Coming from the same environment as NWA, I understand why they went for the money. During that time--as now--there wasn't much money in our neighborhoods; so, naturally, we were highly susceptible to any moneymaking scheme presented to us. In fact, I remember telling a female friend how I hated being in the drug business; &, she asked why do I do it then? In which I replied, "Because this is where the money's at. If oranges turned the same profit, I would be under the freeway selling oranges along with the Mexicans." However, just as the infiltration of drugs into our neighborhoods became a tool of self-destruction so has Corporate America's infiltration into L.A.'s gangster culture, as Davis acknowledged:

David James expresses pessimism that ANY contemporary culture ... can escape ... assimilation & repackaging by the 'hegemonic media.' The experience of NWA, & less subtly of the entire burgeoning Colors genre, suggest that Hollywood is eager to mine L.A.'s barrios & ghettos for every last

lurid image of self-destruction & community holocaust.

(Davis, 2006, p. 87.)

When such destructive influences penetrates a culture, it becomes that much easier for the powers that be to PILLAGE, CONTROL, &/or criminalize that culture. For instance, there seems to be a correlation between the time Hollywood backed gangster rap & the rise of the U.S. prison population, which went from 773,919 in 1990, to 1,506,757 in 2016. (World, 2019, p. 127.)

So, why didn't Hollywood back the more popular Black empowerment culture of the likes of P.E.? Quite simply, their interest didn't line up. Since Ice Cube's NWA had strong capitalistic interests--"accumulation of wealth by any means"--Hollywood found it much easier to manipulate this genre than the Black empowerment genre, whose ideology was based on freedom from American Corporate subjugation. As Chuck D explained, in 1997:

When Public Enemy came out we used to say "P.E., we're agents for the **preservation of the Black mind**. We're media hijackers." We worked to hijack the media & **put it in our own form**.... Every time we checked for ourselves on the news they were locking us up anyway ["criminalizing"], so the interpretation coming from Rap was a lot clearer. That's why I call Rap the **Black CNN**.

Rap is now a **worldwide phenomenon**. Rap is the CNN for young people all over the world.

(West, 2004, pp. 173-74.)

Fortunately, as Fred Hampton used to say: "You can kill a revolutionary, but you you can't kill a revolution"; therefore, despite the co-opting of capitalistic rappers, the revolutionary messaging of Chuck D, &

others, still lives on. One of my favorite of P.E.'s progeny, dead prez, is continuing the TRUE Black empowerment messaging, as evident in their song "Gangsta, Gangster,"--featuring Styles P--which explains the pre-Hollywood meaning of gangsta [spelled with an "a," not an "er"]:

[A gangsta is] **not the image they selling us on the TV screen**/he's a survivor, a provider by any means/move with strategy, **outsmarting his enemies**/... everything's twisted, the game **is so misunderstood**/[a gangsta] used to be a protector, **MAN OF THE PEOPLE**/now they're **MOSTLY FOLLOWERS**/man **WHERE ARE THE LEADERS?**/.... he works a hard job/trying to raise a Black child/he breaks bread with his people like **Jesus** did/try to explain to the children **what the evils is**.

Now, to truly understand why rappers, such as Ice Cube, Lil Wayne--a man who, a few years ago, said "Fuck Black Lives Matter" on Nightline, & the others would risk their reputations by being associated with a capitalist who openly has White Supremacists on stand-by, just because he promised to increase their bank accounts, reread this piece & substitute Trump/Republican Party for Hollywood & Corporate America.

RESOURCES

- Davis, Mike. (2006). City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in L.A., 2nd ed. (UK: Verso)
- West, Cornel. (2004). Democracy Matters: Winning The Fight Against Imperialism (New York: Penguin Group)
- World Almanac, The. (2019). (New York: Infobase)