

MARXISM IN MUSIC:
AN ANALYSIS OF *RUN THE JEWELS* 3

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MARXISM IN MUSIC

Introduction

Popular culture is a difficult term to define and thereby an arduous subject to tackle. Of the many definitions posited by John Storey in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015) one of the preeminent explanations is that popular culture, “is in effect an *empty* conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use” (p. 14). Popular culture can come from the masses who popularize certain products, commodities, or modalities. Popular culture can also be created by the elite who use it as a means of passively quelling the masses. For the purpose of this essay we will examine a piece of popular culture, a hip-hop album entitled *Run the Jewels 3* (2016), as an artifact created by members of the public and popularized by the masses with the aid of the elite. Adopting an analytical approach, we will study how Marxist theories are represented in the album. The examination of the album will include the historical context and political climate surrounding its creation, its representation of the Marxist ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ theory, and the overall message created and conveyed through the music.

Background on Run the Jewels

Run the Jewels is a hip-hop duo consisting of Michael Render (stage-name “Killer Mike”) from Atlanta, Georgia, and Jaime Meline (stage-name “El-P”) from Brooklyn, New York. As an integral part of popular culture, it is worth noting the distinct cultural backgrounds of these two artists. One is an African-American man from the Southern United States while the other is a Caucasian male from the North. The juxtaposition of these distinct cultures is noticeable in their production as the bombastic bass-fueled beats of the Southern hip-hop scene meet with the aggressive instrumentals of the East Coast. The unique combination of Northern

and Southern, black and white, and mixed political views of the two members make *Run the Jewels* an interesting piece of popular culture to analyze as it is representative of multiple cultures and ideologies. As John Storey elucidates in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2015), “‘the people’ refers neither to everyone nor to a single group within society but to a variety of social groups which, although differing from one another in other respects...are distinguished from the economically, politically and culturally powerful groups within society” (p. 11). Considering Render and Meline as members of ‘the people,’ it is important to note their roles as representatives of many distinct groups. Before beginning a full analysis of the duo’s third album *Run the Jewels 3* (2016), it is crucial to examine the theories of Karl Marx as they relate to this popular cultural artifact.

Marxism

Karl Marx was a German philosopher and economist whose theories and ideas have continued to be influential for over a century. His critical approach to capitalist ideology has been related to both Communism and Socialism, but his distinct approach to societal issues remains associated with him through Marxism. Two of the most crucial ideas that he formed include his views on the ‘mode of production’ and his theory regarding ‘base’ and ‘superstructure.’ As Storey (2015) explains, Marx believed that each period in history was built around a ‘mode of production,’ “that is, the way in which a society is organized (i.e. slave, feudal, capitalist) to produce the material necessities of life” (p. 61). The divisional nature of the ‘mode of production’ makes it easy to recognize in different time periods: the middle ages included feudal relations between kings and peasants in Europe, the 1700s-1800s in the United States included a slave/master dynamic on plantations across the country, and currently the U.S. is a leader in capitalist principles where corporations dominate the public. The layers of

hegemony represented in these distinct social structures give way to the creation of the ‘base’ and ‘superstructure.’ The *Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary & Cultural Criticism* (1995) defines the ‘base’ as, “the economic foundations of society,” while the ‘superstructure’ includes, “the forms of state and social consciousness which inevitably follow that structure” (p. 27). Because the ‘people’ are seen as the majority who are distinguished from the ‘powerful’ each ‘mode of production’ includes the base (peasants, slaves, the middle and lower classes) and the ‘superstructure’ (kings, masters, capitalist corporations/leaders) (Storey, 2015, p. 11). Utilizing these Marxist philosophies an analysis of *Run the Jewels 3* (2016) becomes an elucidatory view of popular culture.

Run the Jewels 3 and Marxism

Utilizing a Marxist approach for analysis of *Run the Jewels 3* (2016) calls for an examination of the historical and societal context of its development. As Storey (2015) explains, “A classical Marxist approach to popular culture would above all else insist that to understand and explain a text or practice it must always be situated in its historical moment of production, analysed [sic] in terms of the historical conditions that produced it” (p. 63). With this in consideration, *Run the Jewels 3* (2016) is a prime example of culture influencing a product. Two distinct events occurring during the 2015/2016 production of the album are worth noting: ongoing clashes between police and civilians and the United States’ presidential election.

Police brutality and the use of excessive force were major topics of debate around the United States in 2016. Multiple high-profile killings of unarmed African American men were creating a fervor across the country. The deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling in 2016 were livestreamed on Facebook and published on YouTube, respectively, leading to a series of protests as well as clashes between police and civilians. The National Newspaper Publishers

Association (NNPA), the largest trade association of African American owned media companies in the United States, considered the events so severe that they declared, “A state of emergency now exists in Black America” (NNPA, 2016, p. 9). Michael Render and Jaime Meline were entirely aware of these issues and utilized their music to promote awareness for the continued persecution of minorities as well as the issue of police violence.

The eighth track from *Run the Jewels 3* (2016) titled “Thieves (Screamed the Ghost)” is a haunting portrait of these issues plaguing society. The lyrics of the ballad paint a picture of the effects of continued racism on society while discussing the causes of rioting. Render starts off the track with the lines “He just leaving and he screamin' Jesus/He had the highest hopes/People yellin', screamin' at polices/Riots tonight, riots tonight/Burnin', lootin', shootin', takin', thievin'” (Render, 2016, track 8). Render is discussing the death of someone shot while walking away from a scene and the ensuing chaos caused by the murder. The agony of despair can be felt in his words as he equates those murdered to “prey in a deadly game” in the next lines (Render, 2016, track 8). The true power of this song, however, comes from the back and forth between Render and Meline in their respective second verses. Meline describes the scene of a police shooting through the eyes of a reporter who witnesses civilians with their heads hung low. Suddenly he sees the dead come to life and explains, “So many years of this violence/Now we're surrounded by the souls of the dead and defiant/Saying, "Look what you've done, you designed it"/When the bough breaks, hear the wraith scream, "Riot"” (Meline, 2016, track 8). The powerful accusation is that vengeance is coming due to the violence of the officials sworn to protect the public. Render continues the intensity of the exchange with his verse: “Death gon' deal with the guilty, mane/The universe curses the killers, mane/Can't keep killin' God's children, mane/A pound of flesh is what you owe/Your debt is due, give up your ghost” (Render, 2016, track 8). The

message of the track is clear- persistent violence from officers and officials will continue to cause protests and aggression until the wrongs are made right. The song is a stunning representation of the thoughts of so many members of the public across the country at the time it was released. An artifact of popular culture was thereby representative of the concerns that the public might continue to be overlooked by members of higher ranks. These concerns were presented to elected officials as the presidential race continued.

The 2016 U.S. election was reaching a fever pitch while Render and Meline wrote the album. Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders were leading the race causing extensive debates between Republicans, Democrats, Democratic Socialists, and more. Michael Render was an avid supporter of Bernie Sanders, a Democratic Socialist, going so far as to introduce him in Render's hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. On the eve of election, as Trump was winning the race, Run the Jewels chose to release an extra single titled "2100" ahead of the album's release. The track works to calm the public by giving their concern a voice as so many people across the country felt hopeless at the thought of the overly-aggressive and under-experienced Donald Trump running the country. It is in this song that Render and Meline truly embrace their roles as members of 'the people' by eliciting hope for the future. Render tells the public, "Make love, smoke ****, fight, or laugh hard, and live long/That's the antidote/You defeat the Devil when you hold onto hope/'Cause kinfolk life is beautiful" (Render, 2016, track 9). Render refers to his listeners, those against the election of President Trump, as his kin- a group of people in opposition to a higher-ranking member of society.

The Marxist theories of 'base' and 'superstructure' can be paralleled here with Run the Jewels, as representatives of the 'people,' acting as the 'base' while Trump, an elected official in opposition to the needs of the public, represents the 'superstructure.' The optimism of the track

was a tool for the duo who felt that the country needed that level of hope in such a dark hour (Run the Jewels, 2016). The duo continues this parallel to ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ as well as the ‘modes of production’ with other visuals and lyrics.

The album’s closer is a two-part song titled “A Report to the Shareholders/Kill Your Masters” that continues reflections of Marxist ideologies. A recurring motif throughout the album is the social construct of slaves and masters. The song’s title reflects two forms of the ‘modes of production.’ The first part of the title relates to capitalism as it references shareholders in a metaphor for big business. The second part of the title juxtaposes shareholders with masters as Run the Jewels are comparing big business owners to slave masters keeping their subordinates in check. Again, the dynamic between master and slave, big business and the general public are collocated. Render calls for the end of this dynamic as he proclaims, “Choose the lesser of the evil people, and the Devil still gon’ win/It could all be over tomorrow, kill our masters and start again” (Render, 2016, track 14). Render is calling out the ‘superstructure’ as “evil people” and even relating them to the Devil. He believes that killing the masters, or flushing out the evil in power, is the best way to restart society.

The idea presented here is extremely relatable to Karl Marx. Adam Roberts’ *Frederic Jameson* from the Routledge Critical Thinkers Series (2000) reflected on Marxism and found, “The world needs to be changed, according to Marx, because society is inequitable and oppressive, and millions live in misery and poverty when they need not do so” (p. 17). If the millions are living in misery then a change is necessary and while Marx did not call outright for such drastic measures as killing the masters, his belief in the need for change is shared with Run the Jewels.

The oppressive nature of the regime in power is agreed upon by Meline who raps, “I mean a horse is a horse of course, but who rides is important/Sitting high with a uniform, barking orders, demanding order” (Meline, 2016, track 14). The imagery being presented is of a ranking official, possibly of the police force or military, yelling down to the people below him as he strides on his horse. These continued visual portraits of those in power abusing their stature continues the call to action from the ‘people.’ Another track that reflects the desire to overthrow the ‘superstructure’ that is in place is titled “Hey Kids (Bumaye).” The title itself uses a Congolese (Bumaye) word that translates to “kill him,” making it clear that the duo is suggesting the most drastic of means to bring freedom back to the masses. Render starts his verse inciting the “classless masses” to take up arms and burn those palaces built by the fascists (Render, 2016, track 5). He encourages the common people to recognize their strength and revolt against the powers that have kept them down. The fight against fascism is one that continues to this day and was a focus of Marx’s thoughts. His model of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ worked to demonstrate how the public was confined by those in power. While it may not be obvious, many societies are led by dictators posing as politicians when one takes in to consideration how little some publics are able to influence their respective governments (for example Sudan with their current president Omar Al-Bashir).

The overall tone of the album is aggressive, violent, and angry, but the message is not intended to be so literal. The pair are not actively recruiting members for a guerilla faction that intends to murder leaders and erect their own. As the album progresses the tracks of aggression-laden lyrics with heavy bass are undercut by more melodic, thoughtful reflections (such as “2100”). The message is one that conveys the attitude surrounding much of the United States during the tumultuous events of 2015 and 2016. The public were restless, upset, and unhappy

with the officials that were meant to be representing them. The aggression from police forces along with the election of a billionaire with little regard for the middle and lower classes created a tension that is both represented and relieved through the tracks of *Run the Jewels 3* (2016). The power of a piece of popular culture to be both relatable and edifying displays its strength.

Conclusion

While popular culture may be difficult to define, its study is integral to an understanding of humanity and society. Many great minds have developed theories and ideas in attempts to interpret the many different forms that popular culture can take. Karl Marx's approach to popular culture utilizing the historical context for a popular culture artifact continues to prove a practical method for analysis. Implementing his techniques to study Run the Jewels' third album, *Run the Jewels 3* (2016), allows for a more thorough understanding of the message and tone of the album. Recognizing the socio-political climate that surrounded its production as well as its overall historical context shows that it is an important piece of popular culture. The ability of the album to represent the restlessness of a society that has been taken advantage of by those in power is crucial to its significance. Its ability to simultaneously provide a voice for the 'people' as well as plan for revolution mark it as one of the most important records of 2016. The Marxist ideologies that it parallels, including the 'modes of production' as well as 'base' and 'superstructure,' make it extremely interesting to dissect with a Marxist approach. As the duo plan to release a follow-up within the next year, one can only hope that it will resonate as deeply as its predecessor.

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