

**Hip-Hop As Mass Media: Cultural Imperialism, Commodity and the Politics of
Economy and Image**

By Jared Ball

tables@mac.com

www.voxunion.com

Evidence that rap music is North America's number one cultural export and as such its tremendous impact over both domestic and international cultural development is abundant.¹ What is less clear is the affect on or the relationship to the current conditions of Black/African America (among others) and the ways in which the forms of this cultural export function when put into the larger institutional contexts of socio-economic, political and cultural institutions both domestic and foreign. In other words, why do we like what we like? And why is what is popular, popular? What follows is one attempt to answer these kinds of questions by looking at hip-hop culture as mass media, thereby, clarifying its relationship to and function within society.

The following is based on several presuppositions. These include but are not limited to the following: That no human beings are by nature or by racial classification more prone to poverty, violence, etc. than any others; there is no such thing as free will only processes of socialization, that what is the most popular form of hip-hop music and image is the least produced but most magnified and distributed; this least-produced-but-most-magnified-worst-version of hip-hop is used as any other mass media to promote and sustain existing relationships of power and that this is a problem.

Two questions must immediately be addressed. One, what is hip-hop culture? And two, what do we mean when we say "mass media."

Time and space constraints force the narrowing of both answers to the following. To the first, what is hip-hop culture, the legend himself KRS-One's summary is fitting here. Hip-hop is a larger culture within which rap music – our focus herein – is but one of nine elements. The others include the dee-jay, street knowledge, fashion, language, entrepreneurialism, dancing (breaking), beat-boxing, graffiti art. It is a manifestation of African culture as it has been experienced and reshaped by its interaction with the political, social and economic entity known as the United States of America and, therefore, is susceptible to all that that entails – a topic to which we will return shortly.

Time and space constraints mean that we must, as well, simplify our discussion of our second immediate concern, mass media or mass communication. For the immediate purpose mass media/communication is meant to describe any set of messages that are produced from a centralized point or location and distributed over larger distances and to greater audiences. Broadly defining mass media this way allows for more inclusion into what can be considered mass media and, therefore, directly contradicts certain commonly-held views of the subject. For instance, technological determinists and other mass communication scholars whose focus is made too narrow by a solely Western worldview repeat many of the mistakes made by scholars in other fields. They fall prey to that all-pervasive Western tendency to trace anything of human importance to Greece and in so doing ignore or devalue the perspectives of the overwhelming world majority, i.e. everyone else. Mass communications scholars argue that mass media originated with the West (Greece) and with, as the name implies, the development of technology – starting with the written word (Greece again) and greatly expanded in 1452 by Gutenberg's printing press.²

This perspective is problematic for a variety of reasons. First this view commits the gross error of beginning the history of written communication with Greece. This ignores the tens of thousands of years of pre-existing human history which includes, among many others, the variety of African written languages that were old long before Greece or Europe were even existed.³ It is no coincidence that the first libraries and universities were in Africa or that the development of Europe as a civilized region occurred south to north – Greece to Rome and so on – that is, from the regions closest to Africa and Asia.⁴ This narrow Western view also misrepresents architecture such as the Kemetic (Egyptian) pyramids which despite commonly held views were not originally meant as tombs but were metaphysical, astrological and practical markers whose messages were meant to be used as forms of mass media.⁵

Secondly, the narrow Western viewpoint ignores, among countless others, the cultures of the African continent and diaspora whose wide spread and traditional orally-based communications were also forms of mass media equal in value to anything technologically produced. These messages were/are reproduced from a central point (an elder's mouth for instance) and then distributed (through similar oral methods) over wide distances and audiences. But, beyond this omitted view of mass media are important issues of culture and worldview that are wrapped up within these "other" forms of mass communication that would be of great value to today's concerns over the global arrangement of power, wealth, culture and even the nation-state itself.⁶

For our immediate purpose, however, these narrowly held views of mass media and hip-hop as a form of the latter also serve to obscure

alternate views of the larger context in which all of this is played out. That context can be best summed up by the Five C's: Colonialism, Capitalism, Commodity, Co-optation and Cultural Imperialism. We began by raising the issue of the relationship between hip-hop as a cultural export and its effect on the conditions of Black America. This can best be addressed by the five C's but first requires some attempt at painting a clearer picture of the state of the Black community in the United States.

An oversimplification of a discussion of the five C's will help us more properly understand how hip-hop imagery is shaped to support an end result of cookie-cutter rap and deleterious images, messages, etc. and try to answer those primary questions of why we like what we like and why is what is popular, popular? Colonialism explains more accurately how Black America fits into America's capitalistic economic system. It reveals the more accurate relationship as citizen-subjects as opposed to the mythical concept of a "citizen" who has equal rights and opportunities. This label, though generally applied to the relationship between Western powers and so-called "Third World" countries, is more so than not a better frame or lens through which to consider the experience of Black Americans. In short, Black Americans are sectioned off socially, dependent on political leadership whose powers are relative to their ability to appease more powerful entities, and have the wealth produced by their labor exported to the larger or dominant society just as would happen in the traditional relationship of colony to Mother Country.⁷

The current economic system, described more or less accurately by the term capitalism, emphasizes individualism while denying the aspects of its economy that are heavily planned or government-controlled. Similarly, and most importantly for our immediate purposes, capitalism

places everything we can imagine on the value of the dollar which then allows, encourages and rewards commodity formation, co-optation and cultural imperialism. Simply put, the dollar was created in the absence of tradable goods and used to control the behavior of conquered people. This led naturally to the “original sin” of capitalism as Marx saw it, the commodity.⁸ By making everything a commodity– that is placing the value of all goods, services, land and even cultural expression on the basis of a dollar – it allows for a small network of those who “control the means of production” (or in terms of music the distribution) to control the shape and reach of what is produced.

Co-optation and cultural imperialism actually form the labeling of a two-part system in which the latter is the result of the former. Rulers of the world have long since learned that the best method for a few to control many is not by means of whips, chains or guns but by manipulating the culture of the group to be ruled.⁹ That is, have the cultural expression of the conquered be adjusted to create an appearance of inclusion and shared interests with the rulers while assuring that this remains just that, an impression, mirage, myth or lie. This is why the end results in popularized hip-hop music and imagery are focused on conspicuous consumption, misogyny, violence and these become the standard for “the Black American experience.” This results in the perception that what is an intended, systemic occurrence – Black poverty, crime, violence, etc. – is actually the fault of flawed Black people, communities or cultures.

Despite mass media images and an American rhetoric of equality, justice and opportunity Black America is in many ways no better than at any other time in history. Whether it's the larger issue of a class based society being solidified into a world from which there is little hope to

escape, or a series of reports highlighting the true position of Black America relating to the national and international economic order some worrisome trends appear.¹⁰ What becomes clear is that Black America is systemically kept from economic advancement, is targeted for imprisonment, is relegated to the lowest rungs of living, health care and education and is no more politically or economically powerful than at any other time in US history.¹¹ This reality, simply put, is not at all made clear in the mass distribution of Black images in general and hip-hop specifically. If any of these realities do emerge they are made to appear as the result of individual or Black collective responsibility. Rarely, if ever, is any of this explained as the result of systemic, institutionalized policy and practice. Perhaps this is best summarized by legal scholar and writer Derrick Bell:

If the nation's policies towards blacks were revised to require weekly, random round-ups of several hundred blacks who were then taken to a secluded place and shot, that policy would be more dramatic, but hardly different in result, than the policies now in effect, which most of us feel powerless to change.¹²

Hip-hop seen as a form of mass media allows for us to better understand its function in societies such as this one.¹³ The monopolistic tendencies inherent to a capitalist form of economics leads to the current trend of media conglomeration and control by fewer and fewer people – mostly men, mostly white, all wealthy. These human beings are similar to the rest of us in that they all have worldviews, perspectives and interests. Dissimilar to the rest of us these people have enormous ability to make their worldviews, perspectives and interests dominant and to appear as

though our interests are theirs when they are actually quite different, or should be.

We should conclude by offering at least one potential remedy. Bootlegging. Bootlegging is a revolutionary activity. If we bootleg the music of major-company artists (primarily if not exclusively) we can begin to rearrange the current power relationships as they relate to music and culture. Artists go broke not from bootleggers but from harmful record company contracts which burden the consumer who has to pay \$15-20 per CD while the average artist is lucky to see even 25 cents. Bootlegging eliminates the middleman-record company and allows street vendors to serve as distributors. On the street we can buy bootlegs for \$5. If this becomes the primary means of distribution where similar arrangements are made between warehouses, artists and vendors we can keep the purchase price down while increasing the net income of the individual artist by several hundred percent. Most importantly this returns the connection between artist and consumer that has been lost through the involvement of major media corporations. This means more artistic freedom, originality and responsibility of the artist to her/his community or constituency and a greater potential for there to be developmental cultural expression rather than the destructive one that now dominates.

¹ Wapshott, N. (2003). Half a century after the pop charts began, African-American artists call all the tunes. *The Times* (London), October 13, p. 16.

² See such technological determinist and Western-centered scholars of mass communications as Startt and Sloan's *Historical Methods in Mass Communication*, Harold Innis' *The Bias of Communication*, Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, James W. Carey's *Communication as Culture*.

³ For more on African writing systems see Ayele Bekerie's *Ethiopic an African Writing System: Its History and Principles*, also Charles Finch's *Echoes from the Old Darkland: Themes from the African Eden*, also Jacob Carruthers' *Mdu Ntr: Divine Speech*.

⁴ See John Henrik Clarke's *My Life in Search of Africa*, John G. Jackson's *Introduction to African Civilization*, W.E.B. DuBois' *The World and Africa*, Ivan Van Sertima's *African Presence in Early Europe*, Chancellor Williams' *The Destruction of Black Civilization*.

⁵ For more on the meaning and purpose of the pyramids see Charles Finch's *The Star of Deep Beginnings: The Genesis of African Science and Technology*, Gerald Massey's *The Historical Jesus and Mythical Christ*, Yosef ben-Jochannan's *The African Origins of the Major Western Religions*.

⁶ For more on oral traditions and the difference of interpretation and use of technology in Tricia Rose's *Black Noise* and also Thomas Friedson's *Dancing Prophets*. Also, in terms of current global arrangements of nations and wealth and how these could all be reorganized to better serve humanity see John Henrik Clarke's *Notes for an African World Revolution*, Cheikh Anta Diop's *Notes for a Federated African State*, Kwame Nkrumah's *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* and Kenichi Ohmae's *The End of the Nation State*.

⁷ For more on the colonial situation of Black America see, Charles Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael's *Black Power*, William Tabb's *The Political Economy of the Black Ghetto* and also Lucius Barker, et al.'s *African Americans and the American Political System*.

⁸ Marx is quoted from Eugene Kamenka's *The Portable Karl Marx* which itself has more from Marx on commodity, value, accumulation of capital, wealth and issues of alienation. And for more on commodity-making and the issue of real versus nominal value see Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

⁹ A strong "inner-circle" discussion of the issue of cultural imperialism and co-optation can be found in Zbigniew Brzezinski's *The Grand Chessboard*. More can be found as this relates to the history of Black Music in Marc Anthony Neal's *What the Music Said* and *Songs in the Key of Black Life*, Nelson George's *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*. See also Greg Tate's *Everything But the Burden*.

¹⁰ See Paul Krugman's January 5, 2004 article in *The Nation* magazine titled "The Death of Horatio Alger."

¹¹ For more on the current state of Black America see the recent report from United for a Fair Economy by Dedrick Muhammad et al, titled *The State of the Dream 2004*, also Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*, Claude Anderson's *Powernomics* in which he says on page 6 that Black America's wealth is the exact 1/10 of 1% that is was in 1860. For

more on political economy and its relationship to Black America see Manning Marable's *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, Michael Parenti's *Democracy for the Few*, Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, anything by Malcolm X, Martin Luther King's *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*, Lucius Barker, et al. *African Americans and the American Political System* and George Lipsitz's *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.

¹² Quoted from his excerpted book *Where Do We Go From Here* as it appeared in *Strangers and Neighbors: The Relations Between Blacks and Jews in the United States*, p.806.

¹³ For a more in-depth account of the relationship between mass media and society see Charles Mills' *The Power Elite*, Noam Chomsky and Ed Hermann's *Manufacturing Consent*, Harold Cruse's section on media in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Clovis Semmes' *Cultural Hegemony*, Amos Wilson's *Blueprint for Black Power*, J. Herbert Altschull's *Agents of Power* and Michael Parenti's *Inventing Reality*.