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Sound Identities

Popular Music and
the Cultural Politics of Education

Edited by
Cameron McCarthy, Glenn Hudak,
Shawn Miklaucic, and Paula Saukko



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7. My nephew, also in **twelfth** year studying A levels, responded to my written request to him with **the** following:

Oasis—Supersonic . . . It means a lot to me because it reminds me of last summer which was the best time I've ever had—I'd just finished my exams . . . and I spent 4 months **just** dossing about with me mates, every day we would **hang** about in town, **then** play footy and then get pissed—I can't think of anything else I'd **rather** do. . . This song reminds me of that summer because on the last day before I started at college, a busload of me and about 15 mates all went to watch Oasis at the Hacienda in Manchester **there** was something very special about the whole thing—the band, the venue, the City, the time. I will remember it forever.

8. Carrie, for example:

No Woman, no cry—Bob Marley. This was my holiday song for this year. I went on tour to Israel for three weeks. A lot of the time was spent **travelling** around by coach. We played this song a lot as its very soothing and mellow. Most of the time we were extremely tired and we were travelling **long** distances at night. We played this song whilst looking at the stars etc and falling asleep travelling through the middle of the desert.

9. In the teen magazine *Just Seventeen*, for example, one problem page **letter** complained of a girl's problem with her "brainy" reputation. The advice (with some irony?) was to read school books concealed inside a copy of the magazine.

Going Public: Rock Aesthetics in the American Political Field

Jonathan Sterne

It is as though people who betray the hopes of their youth and come to terms with the world, suffer the penalty of premature decay.

—Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972)

In the last two decades, Americans have witnessed a **number** of major changes in the structure and organization of **political spectacle**—the performance of politics—a change that is connected with shifts in the political and cultural fields themselves. A new generation of **politicians** is ascending to power and with them, cultural practices that were once anathema to the political field (at least its public **presentation**) are now a central part of political spectacle. I wish to consider here one such practice—rock and roll¹—as emblematic of this shift, and in so doing reframe some of the questions about the relationship between rock and politics that have been central to recent rock scholarship. Even as scholars have sought to outline the political potential of rock music, rock has become more and more of an instrument of mainstream political activity. It has become a tool of political persuasion, but not in the way that so many cultural critics have imagined. By reexamining two key appearances of rock in mainstream American politics—Tipper Gore and the PMRC's (Parents' Music Resource Center) quest to regulate rock music in the 1980s, and the use of rock music and culture in the 1992 presidential election—this **essay** offers an examination of how and on what terms rock itself became an instrument of mainstream **electoral** politics. Rock's affiliation with related concepts like youth was **reshaped** in the social context of mainstream politics, where it had traditionally been more legitimate to speak of youth than *for* youth.

While there has been much discussion of rock and the politics of culture, there has been considerably less discussion of rock and the culture of politics. This proposition may sound a bit flip, but consider that the vast majority of recent scholarship on rock music in the United States has been preoccupied with questions of cultural resistance and recuperation.² Scholars addressing rock and other popular music have often attempted to find a politics in the music itself, or in the practices surrounding it.³ This trend in scholarship says more about the scholars than the object itself: there is a strong collective desire among leftists (or left-sympathetic scholars) to find progressive politics in the cultural practices they themselves enjoy.

At the very moment that academics began to focus on the cultural politics of rock music, rock took on a new set of valences in the culture of mainstream politics. In addition to being the object of derision on the one hand and regulation on the other (tendencies that have a long history, see Bennett, Frith, Grossberg, Shepherd, & Turner, 1993; Martin, 1988), rock—and attendant categories such as youth—became a point of positive identification for politicians and political constituencies. One could argue that rock's presence in political life only makes sense since rock is a central part of American middle-class commercial culture, but this claim says little about the appearance of rock bands at Bill Clinton's inauguration ball or Lee Atwater jamming with blues greats—events that would have been inconceivable even a few years earlier. In other words, the scholarly focus on rock's cultural politics has said little about rock's place in political culture.

The term "politics" itself has taken on a rather ambiguous meaning in recent cultural scholarship. No doubt that movements like feminism, queer politics, and antiracism have shown the need to attend to the political aspects of everyday life. Yet at the same time, we mustn't forget the other, more narrow, more conventional definition of politics. My reference to politics throughout this piece will mostly connote this much narrower sphere of activity, what Pierre Bourdieu would call the political field. The political field is a relatively limited set of elite institutions: the government and the very large semiprivate, private, nonprofit and "public interest" sectors that together drive the economy of Washington D.C. (such as it is) and appear in "political" news coverage. It is "politics" in the narrow, colloquial sense of the term. Clearly, the political field has its endemic practices, its own rites of institution, its own hierarchy of positions, and a unique network of relations among its actors. The presence of rock and roll, both as an

object of political discourse and as a form of political practice—often by politicians themselves and those close to them—is my object of study here.⁴ My distinction between the broader notion of "politics" and a "political field" is at least as much heuristic as it is empirical, but the distinction is useful for the purposes of this analysis.⁵

My project here builds on some of the questions raised by Lawrence Grossberg's work on rock and the cultural politics of what he calls "the new conservatism." Grossberg claims that conservatives attack rock through three related strategies: the first demands a complete rejection of rock music and culture; the second attempts to police the boundaries between the acceptable and unacceptable; and the third attempts to appropriate rock and challenge "youth culture's claim of ownership" (Grossberg, 1992, pp. 4–9; see also Grossberg, 1993; Grossberg, 1997, pp. 253–270). This new conservatism is itself part of a larger trajectory in the political field, a generational shift—and by this I mean both a real change in terms of who occupies positions of power, and a representative-demographic change in who makes a "constituency" in American politics. While there is no definitive break between "generational" regimes in mainstream American politics, Bill Clinton's election and reelection, in addition to the 1994 election of the first Republican Congress in decades, were widely hailed as marking such a shift. Nowhere is the opposition between young and old, the discontinuity between generations, more significant than among political elites, precisely because generational struggles are struggles over who will occupy positions of power, and on what terms those successions will occur. For these same reasons, such struggles are particularly crucial in a political context (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 295).

Rock music's position within mainstream media culture—as a locus of affective investment and as a marker of distinction through taste—have on multiple occasions made it an object of impassioned political discourse, especially given that three of its primary social functions (as noted by Simon Frith, 1987, pp. 140–142) are: a) to aid in self-definition, b) as a tool used to manage the relations between public and private emotional lives, and c) to shape popular memory, specifically by organizing a sense of time. Yet these social functions are hardly unique to rock music; in fact, one could just as easily say that electoral campaigns have these functional aspects as well, at least for those who participate in the political process. Traditionally, rock and electoral politics performed these social functions for two different populations. When they did collide, it was through the kinds of pro-

cesses Grossberg describes, where political actors have attempted to ban, regulate, or control rock music. Over the last two decades, these two spheres have slowly begun to intermingle; rock has become a means toward capturing a “new” social identity, youth, that is being converted into a mode of identification within the political field. Rock appears to have become part of the electoral process—there is a growing understanding that rock audiences are a specific part of the electorate. Rock music has moved from an object of political discourse (e.g., through regulation) to an instrumentality in political life.

This essay considers two moments of articulation within this larger shift I am positing. The first section rethinks the Parents’ Music Resource Center’s attempt to legislate rock music in the mid-1980s. The PMRC has largely been discussed as an attempt to regulate rock music; it has been placed in the history of attempts to “control” rock music and its purported effects on youth. Grossberg cites the PMRC as an example of the conservative tendency to demarcate acceptable and unacceptable forms of rock music. Although there’s no doubt that the PMRC did draw its rhetoric from other attacks on rock and popular culture, we miss a lot if we simply read it as another attempt at censorship (after all, it was not, strictly speaking, a movement for the censorship of rock music). On the contrary, a close reading of Gore’s rhetoric in historical context will show that its true success was not in regulating rock music, but precisely in helping to articulate a new position for rock and youth culture in the mainstream of American politics. Not only did it try to circumscribe youth culture (through promoting mechanisms of parental control), it also constructed a new position from which such a regulation would be possible. In other words, the PMRC was a peculiar attempt to construct an aesthetics of rock music within a political space, and then “teach” that aesthetic to a larger culture. My point here is simple: discussions of the PMRC’s attempts to regulate rock have largely conceived of its exercise of power as repressive. I argue that the maneuvers of the 1980s were more about producing and shaping the intersection of rock culture and political culture than restricting rock culture as such. Power is productive as well as repressive (Foucault, 1978, pp. 92–102).

If Gore’s work in the mid-1980s was about legitimating rock music in the political field, more recent developments concern the nature of its deployment. MTV’s campaign to mobilize young voters and the appearance of rock and roll in mainstream presidential politics are both attempts to instrumentalize rock in the service of expressly po-

litical struggles. This is less about the politicization of rock (though it is a particular kind of politicization) than the emergence of rock in mainstream American politics.

First Moment: The PMRC, or Forging Rock as a Political Instrument

Tipper Gore, the founding mother and spokeswoman of the PMRC, in her 1987 best-seller *Raising PG Kids in an X-Rated Society*, constructs for us the beginning of her crusade:

I had become aware of the emergence of explicit and violent images in the world of music . . . through my children. In December 1984, I purchased Prince’s best-selling album *Purple Rain* for my eleven year old daughter. I had seen Prince on the cover of magazines and I knew that he was the biggest pop idol in years. My daughter wanted the album because she had heard ‘Let’s Go Crazy’ on the radio. But when we brought the album home, put it on the stereo, and listened to it together, we heard the words to a different song, ‘Darling Nikki’: I knew a girl named Nikki/Guess you could say she was a sex fiend/I met her in a hotel lobby masturbating to a magazine. The song went on and on, in a similar manner. I couldn’t believe my ears (Gore, 1987, p. 17).

This, we are told, is the mythical moment when the PMRC was born. But there is more to this story than is readily apparent. Tipper Gore has identified herself as a rock fan, and in fact confessed a special liking for James Brown. The apparent irony in this formulation (“James Brown fan flips when she hears Prince song”), provides an excellent lens for looking at the entire PMRC project as articulated by Gore. It is a classic case of speaking about social difference through aesthetic distinctions; politics working in the language of taste culture (see, e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Frow, 1995; Hebdige, 1979; Herrnstein-Smith, 1991).

Given rock’s function of shaping popular memory, it is possible to see the difference between James Brown and Prince for Tipper Gore not so much as an absolute aesthetic difference, but as a difference in use-value. James Brown appears as *affectively useful* in Gore’s accounts: she casts Brown as embodying a kind of authenticity which she can then claim for herself as well. Her language here casts her less as some kind of social reformer coming in from outside rock culture to control its influence, but rather someone who knows rock culture all too well:

I think you **still had** to use **your** imagination a little with him; he was within bounds. **Look, there's nothing** wrong with rock being very primal. It can unleash energy and even sexual feeling. It's a sexual, sensual form of music, but I don't think that's bad. In fact, I actually like it. I have nothing against the primeval appeal of music—I understand it, I feel it myself, I think it's fine (Chapple & Talbot, 1989, p. 56).

Several things can be said about her repeated application of sexual adjectives to James Brown's music. First, these are terms she reserved for James Brown, and not, say, Frank Zappa. Second, her discussions of Brown are always in terms of his sexuality—eliding at once the gendered and racial dimensions to Brown's popularity. Brown's significance as a symbol of black power—both through his identity as a self-made "Soul Brother #1" and as the author of songs like "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud" (Brackett, 1992; Garofalo, 1992a; Gilroy, 1991, pp. 212–213; Gilroy, 1993, pp. 72–110; Guralnick, 1986; Hoare, 1975)—completely disappear under the weight of Gore's sexual identification.

Gore thus situates herself within a long history of white constructions of blackness. As Michael Rogin and many others have argued, whites in America have used blackness as an index of an emotive, expressive, or more "natural" state; its invocation by the nonblack is a gesture of cultural identification with the bourgeoisie (hooks, 1992; see also Lott, 1995; Rogin, 1992, p. 440; Saxton, 1990). Similarly, Simon Frith has noted the tendency in rock criticism to construct the African or Afro-American as "a figure of white fear and white desire": representing "the other of bourgeois respectability" and "nature" as opposed to "culture" (1992, p. 181). Whatever her actual feelings on the matter, Gore's representation of James Brown as a catalyst for her "primal" (i.e., sexual) feelings has to be understood as a manifestation and expression of her white privilege, and that at the very moment she claims to "understand" the primeval appeal of Brown's music, she is appropriating difference through a classic colonial trope.

Through these rhetorical maneuvers, Gore can claim to know youth culture precisely as she critiques it; her insider status becomes a trope of legitimation. James Brown's music thus "represents" sexuality in Gore's discourse less because of any sexual content in Brown's music than because of the conventions of middle-class white appropriations of black performance. It also authenticates her represented experience by repeating the common sense of much white rock criticism—her speaking position is "humanized," "legitimated," or, more accurately,

"bourgeoisified" by it. Her representation of her experience of James Brown becomes a contemporary kind of cultural capital she can use, along with her other rock music experience (like playing in a Beatles cover band, and listening to Frank Zappa in college) that constructs her as occupying an "insider" position with respect to rock music and mainstream culture.

Prince has an entirely different although equally important function in Gore's discourse. If James Brown is the metaphor for her own pleasure and desire, then Prince is, to use Frith again, "the shocking other of bourgeois respectability"—the exemplar of that which must be contained. Prince is something of an easy target: a black male gender-bending performer who occasionally uses explicit lyrics.⁶ Though Gore carefully avoids explicitly attacking Prince on the grounds of sexual deviance, that current flows just beneath the surface of her language. Prince has often been attacked on homophobic grounds or simply through insults to his masculinity,⁷ and that was certainly part of the popular awareness of Prince at the time Gore was writing. In this way her language could appeal to already existing sentiment without directly speaking to it.

Although one could try to trace out all the chains of influence and lines of similarity and difference between James Brown and Prince and try to map them out on some kind of balance sheet, formal, textual and stylistic differences alone will not explain the absolute difference between the two artists in Gore's rhetoric: it is *time* that marks this difference. Gore represents James Brown as part of her experience of youth, her own sexuality and "primal" tendencies. Prince, on the other hand, appears to address the sexuality of her children. Gore's pleasures and displeasures, especially her representation of them, construct absolute differences between taste communities. In Gore's musicopolitical vision, Prince becomes the pervert and Brown the sexual athlete—as if Prince were such a far leap from James Brown in the first place.

The construction of a generational difference—marking a hypothetical endpoint to baby boomer youth culture somewhere after James Brown but before Prince—thus feeds into a larger generational move. The PMRC's move to "expose" rock music to parents, its infantilization of teenagers, and its vulgar media-effects theory were in fact parts of a double articulation for the baby boom generation in the political field. It was an attempt to consolidate a generational authority—simultaneously as parents and as "former" youth who wished to retain some-

thing of the label. As parents who'd "been there," the PMRC and its constituency (mostly white, middle-class identified parents then in their 30s and 40s) not only knew better the experience of youth than those people who were chronologically young, they also had the right and duty to police youth culture: in Gore's words, to "reassert some control over the cultural environment in which our children are raised" (1987, p. 13). This statement requires or invokes a position from which control of one's cultural environment is possible. The PMRC was about constructing a discourse of parental authority, specifically with respect to youth culture, that had been more or less in recess since the mid-1960s (Males, 1996).⁸

Gore's rhetoric was emblematic of the tension present in this strategy. She was a member of a social formation that had, to a great degree, authorized itself through discourses of youth. Now, in the 1980s, that social formation which had purported to test the boundaries of cultural institutions like the family suddenly found itself about to take control of them, and it could no longer simply authorize its position in terms of its youthfulness. Still, youth was an inextricable part of baby boom identity. The result, as Grossberg has noted, was that youth became a "battlefield on which generations of adolescents, baby boomers, parents and corporate media" fought to articulate it in a way beneficial to their interests (Grossberg, 1992, pp. 181–200). Gore's rhetoric was part of a larger canonization of the 1960s. This move was twofold: it disarticulated the definition of youth from the physically young, allowing an aging baby boom to hold onto its idealized experience, while at the same time temporally bounding that experience in such a way as to make it inaccessible to those who were born too late. Ironically, the very concept of youth became a way of constituting a boundary between the physically young and the forever young.

A temporally bounded youth also laid the groundwork for other articulatory moves. By virtue of being members of the dominant class who were growing older, the baby boom moved into durable institutions—most importantly, the state—that had their own peculiar rites of entrance that were not necessarily amenable to discourses of youthfulness. (That this could have been a moment of immense social transformation—at least based on the political claims of the youth culture from which these people emerged—should not be lost on the reader.) Some of the dominant dispositions within the so-called baby boom social formation were not necessarily congruent with the political po-

sitions that they were moving into within the political field. Attitudes such as a general mistrust of authority, a tendency toward informality, the fetishization of youth and youthfulness as a mode of experience, and pleasure in postwar popular culture such as television and rock and roll were poorly matched to the traditional codes of political performance and affectation—both for the politicians themselves and those surrounding them. Since the problem was one of legitimation, the solution was an enunciatory move (or rather a series of them). It required the founding of a *representative* position from which a constituency, or an identification, could be garnered—and more importantly, *spoken for*. It required a new kind of speaking position from within mainstream politics. The political field relies on this kind of representational logic: to act in the political field, one must be acting as or for somebody. Actors (and I mean either individuals or groups) in the political field function as proxies for a larger social group (for whom access to this field is relatively circumscribed). In doing so, the political actor becomes the substitute for the absent larger group, at least in the political field, so that the group is thereby politically constituted through its representation. In the political field, then, the representative literally embodies those for whom she speaks. To paraphrase Bourdieu, "As the personification . . . of a social fiction [she] raises those whom [she] represents out of their existence as separate individuals, enabling them to act and speak through [her] as a single person" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 248). In return, she gains the power to speak and act as if the group *were* a single person.

Gore made this move through constructing a homology of authority. By continually deploying the term "parent" she founds her credibility and also opens up a network of possible identifications: she speaks as a parent to all parents. Both in founding the Parents' Music Resource Center (with other wives of Washington politicians), and in writing her book, she based her credibility on her "parentness," and relied on a pop psychology of adolescence and parenting to back up her arguments about mass culture and the relations of parents and youth. She constructed a simple one-to-one link between relations in the family unit and the subjects covered in her book: childhood development, violence, sex, suicide, Satanism, alcohol and drugs, and finally, rock concerts. This move constructed a position of "parent" as caretaker and authority figure within the family, conveniently addressing the popular anxiety over parenting at the time by grounding and stabilizing that parental position within a very traditional psychologi-

cal and political discourse.⁹ It also consolidated a privileged class position by using the white middle-class family ideal as a normative index.

The PMRC's program was a traditional middle-class cultural strategy of containment. Specifically, it was a move to articulate a generation of younger parents to very traditional middle-class practices and dispositions. Gore referred to drugs and violence, a reality for many inner-city residents, as a "fantasy world." She argued for the need to maintain children's innocence—an innocence that can only be constructed in a space free from physical danger and want of essentials—but she never took on the conditions of poverty that disallow such innocence at any age. Instead she called for parents to take a stand on media images that might disrupt her idealized family space. The middle class speaks as if it were the universal class.

This middle-class orientation was also manifested in the PMRC's distinctive approach to a "solution" to the problem of objectionable rock lyrics. The battle for cultural hegemony became a form of consumer advocacy:

Our approach was the direct opposite of censorship. We called for more information, not less. We did not advocate a ban of even the most offensive records or tapes. We simply urged that the consumer be forewarned through the use of warning labels and/or printed lyrics visible on the outside packaging of music products (Gore, 1987, p. 26).

This remarkably Foucauldian strategy operates on the assumption that if rock music would simply offer up its "truth" through closer examination, it could be regulated and contained. Although other writers have argued that Gore's program amounted to censorship (Harrington, 1992),¹⁰ it very deliberately marks a distance between itself and other attacks on rock. The goal was not to keep rock and youth culture outside the middle-class home, but rather to provide a means for navigating youth culture. Clearly, "the consumer" in Gore's account is the rational adult parent, who is able to adjudicate between appropriate and inappropriate music for his or her child if only the industry would offer a little help. The question of youth—either children or teenagers—as consumers of rock is entirely elided. Even though Gore used the rhetoric of control, the PMRC was less about the containment of rock as such than providing the tools for parents to use it within the dominant middle-class culture; it transformed the regulation of rock from a Moral Majority issue to a problem of consumer rights. The PMRC rhetoric used the familiar construct of the middle-class home as

a frontier to be protected from external dangers, leaving parents as the sentinels standing guard. Called to action as parents, the middle class was once again the agent and guardian of civilization, except this time rock and rollers were on both sides of the gates.

Gore's rhetoric of protection is not a new thing, nor is it somehow specific to rock. The postwar culture in which rock emerged saw other struggles over the legitimate boundaries between children's culture and adults' culture. As Lynn Spigel writes, "the particular battles fought over childhood were linked to power struggles in the adult culture" (Spigel, 1993, p. 261). This kind of postwar political rhetoric draws on a half-century-old discourse that endowed youth with a particular kind of political *objectivity*: child-labor laws, the clean water movement, and the movement for pasteurization of milk and dairy products all took youth as their political object—something to be protected through legislation and political activity.¹¹ The difference between Gore's rhetoric and other attacks on rock, however, is that she also had to negotiate youth as an ambiguous category of political *subjectivity*. The boom in postwar youth culture did carry with it political valences, ranging from integration on the dance floor to the various student movements and the development of political consciousness (however temporary) in media outlets of youth culture such as *Rolling Stone*. Gore does little with this subjectivity except to assert it: she had her wild youth, she made some mistakes, and now she's all grown up. Gore elaborates a speaking voice that at once "knows better" than the youth culture even as it derives credibility from the language of youth culture.

Tipper Gore and the PMRC constructed their own cultural saliency through asserting their parenthood while reasserting their claim to youth. Through this gesture, they constructed a speaking position within the political field which appeared as though it could be mobilized almost indefinitely. They also successfully divided, bounded, and rearticulated youth culture for a generation coming to terms with its growing responsibility and political power. Thus, just as rock music was one basis of founding community in youth culture, so was it a point of identification and distinction (among several) for constructing an emergent political class and its constituency. The boundary between the physically young and the forever young—fostered by the entrance of rock and the trappings of youth culture into an arena where even the hint of rebellion had to be carefully tempered—helped create new possibilities for affective investments in mainstream politics and new modes of address for political actors to approach their

constituencies. It is to the question of youth and rock as a form of political subjectivity that I now turn.

Second Moment: The Public Gets Down

Eight years after Tipper Gore first heard "Darling Nikki," her husband was half of a presidential ticket, and the ten-year-olds she was protecting in 1984 could now cast their votes. The generational struggle which was just beginning to materialize in 1984 had become old news by 1992. It had become more of a demographic issue than any other.

Baby boomers were about to assume power in the political field, while a new generation of youth had been successfully constituted as a demographic group—a political constituency as well as a target audience for cultural products like movies, music, and fashion. Yet in speaking of generations in this fashion, one must take care to avoid a simple correspondence theory, a realist fallacy where the language used to describe a group becomes the group itself:

Many businesses ignore young adults because they are different than baby boomers. Despite their relatively small numbers, baby busters are the best market for cosmetics, movies, and many other products. Businesses can reach young adults if they understand that every generation follows new rules. For example, young adults are more conservative than boomers in some ways and more liberal in others (Mitchell, 1993, p. 50).

This kind of language, taken from an article in *American Demographics*, suggests a strictly realist definition of generations: they are there, and the corporate world simply has to go out and find them. But as with the political field, the marketing field also functions through a logic of transubstantiation: groups are represented through surveys and other research tools. The representation then becomes the group as far as marketers are concerned; the result is that a particular image comes to stand in for the actual group. Eileen Meehan (1990) has shown the skewedness of audience research in radio and television, and the same critique is relevant here. The concept of a "generation" of people is notoriously fuzzy—one cannot simply mark off a beginning and ending for a generation, whether we're talking about baby boomers, or the generations preceding and following them. While people who are roughly the same age can share a set of historically related and age-based experiences, it does not logically follow that they are necessarily of a shared consciousness or social position. As Richard Du Boff and Edward Herman point out, even reading some-

thing so self-evidently age-based as child poverty through the lens of generational politics alone risks effacing more fundamental axes of social difference: "The high rates of child poverty here don't prove generational mistreatment; they show that racism, sexism, and a ruthless elite and class system are taking a heavy toll of traditional victims" (DuBoff & Herman, 1996).¹²

But to dispense with a strictly realist conception of generations does not invalidate age as an analytical concept. On the contrary, the category of youth and the splitting of generations continue to exert tremendous influence in politics and public discourse, not to mention the broader media culture. Age remains a significant demographic category for marketing and for politics, and so it is no surprise that the politics of youth played a significant role in the construction of the 1992 presidential campaign. If Gore has sought to draw a boundary around a certain experience of youth during the mid-1980s, MTV and other media outlets were revitalizing and redefining the concept in popular culture at large. Thus, the prominence of rock music, youth culture, and young voters in the 1992 campaign was a result of a cultural collision of sorts. A number of factors contributed to this, but I want to focus here on the role of rock culture in the campaign.

Despite its commercial viability, this younger generation had not been particularly well constructed within a more explicitly political context prior to 1992. There was very little voter turnout in the under-30 range throughout the 1980s, although those who did turn out voted overwhelmingly conservative (Howe & Strauss, 1993, p. 13). But this group was one of Clinton's strongest constituencies in the 1992 election—he did much better among younger voters than he did among his own age group (Shriver, 1993).

Clinton's use of rock and popular culture more generally synergized with changes in the media field. While Clinton instrumentalized rock music and popular culture in an effort to gain the youth vote, MTV—perhaps the major media outlet claiming to represent youth and rock culture at this point in time—sought the legitimacy, power, and revenue that comes with being a major media outlet for political campaigns. The two developments—MTV's entrance into politics and Clinton's use of rock culture—marked a shift in the nature and tenor of political spectacle.

Clinton's use of popular culture can be understood as an authenticating move, very much in keeping with the strategy the PMRC used in the 1980s: dance to Little Richard, but dis Sistah Souljah. Even attacks on Clinton turned around when the terrain was popular cul-

ture. As Gilbert Rodman has pointed out, George Bush's strategy of associating Clinton with Elvis through attacks on "Elvis economics" and the like not only alienated a number of potential voters but also allowed Clinton to benefit from that association. In response to Bush's accusations, Clinton shot back with "I don't think Bush would have liked Elvis very much, and that's just another thing that's wrong with him" (Rodman, 1996, p. 90). This populist appeal *through* rock and roll exemplifies Clinton's basic strategy: rock becomes a point of political identification and difference. While for Clinton, this was a rhetorical strategy, for MTV it was a marketing fact.

MTV pitches itself to advertisers in both the United States and Europe as the primary way to reach the "16–34 crowd," as this age range constitutes the majority of its viewing share (Frith, 1993, p. 72). So it is significant that political content took up more and more of its news reporting in years preceding the 1992 election. Though not noticeably different in ideological tenor than other media outlets, MTV became increasingly willing to engage its audience politically. This trend developed slowly over time: MTV first organized voter registration drives in 1984. By 1990, it was airing prime-time "rock-the-vote" spots in which American rock stars encouraged MTV's youth audience to vote (Goodwin, 1992, pp. 148–155).

The 1992 campaign marked MTV's coming out as a political player. It conducted a million dollar "Choose or Lose" ad campaign encouraging youth voter participation. For the first time in its history, it covered both the Democratic and Republican national conventions. It invited all three presidential candidates to appear on live televised "youth forums," although only the Clinton-Gore ticket accepted. Clinton's interview on MTV garnered national attention; *Rolling Stone* claimed that "many of the questions posed were tough enough to put even the seasoned political reporters to shame" (Neely, 1992). After seeing Clinton's success on the channel, George Bush agreed to be interviewed by a MTV reporter.

MTV continued to push for its own inclusion in the campaigns by conducting a sort of press campaign of its own. MTV veejay Tabitha Soren, for instance, claimed that younger voters were not apathetic, but uninspired by the candidates. In a *Los Angeles Times* article whose titular pun was not lost on candidates or reporters ("Inspiration Requires New Channels"), Soren suggested this lack of inspiration might be cured by an appearance on MTV (1992). MTV's participation in the election received wide coverage during and after the fact; and this coverage was completely favorable, simultaneously lauding MTV's "se-

rious" political participation and noting its importance to turning out the youth vote (DuBrow, 1992b; Mason, 1992; Mosely, 1992; Rosenberg, 1992; Suro, 1992). In fact, MTV became a synecdoche of the youth vote—in press coverage, the youth constituency became the "MTV vote" (Chapman, 1993). One commentator went so far as to claim that MTV and other media outlets such as talk shows had displaced network news as the primary means for candidates to reach a television audience (DuBrow, 1992a; Ostrow, 1992).

MTV's involvement in presidential politics did not stop with the election. It threw its own inaugural ball, perhaps the most popular in Washington, D.C. Backstage at the inaugural ball, Little Richard was quoted as saying "Bill and Al was havin' a ball, doin' it all. That man loves my music, he loves 'Good Golly Miss Molly.' He knows I'm the architect of rock n' roll" (Smith, 1993). Clinton clearly intended that message to get out, although he was careful in choosing the rock and pop acts to affiliate himself with. He managed to stay within the bounds of taste that Tipper Gore had fleshed out in the 1980s—more mainstream acts that had either outlived their controversial nature or had none to begin with: Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Fleetwood Mac, Barbara Streisand, even Barry Manilow. He picked one of the safest rap acts he could have—L.L. Cool J. Of course, Clinton had already established himself as within rock culture prior to his election. In addition to his widely noted saxophone playing appearances, he had bands like R.E.M and U2 entertaining the crowds in Little Rock on election night.

Although any "insider" to current rock culture would likely question Clinton's particular choices (lots of soft rock acts at the inaugural ball, for instance), the institutions did the work for him: Carole Robinson, senior vice-president of MTV, said "we thought it was a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the fact that young people got involved this year in the political process." The previous month, MTV's chairman, Tom Freston, was invited to Clinton's economic summit in Little Rock, Arkansas (Shriver, 1993).

The events of 1992 certainly mark MTV's advancement as a player in the political field, but more importantly, they mark the fruition of the work on rock and politics that began in the 1980s. The PMRC produced a sphere of acceptable rock culture for the political field into which politicians could later move. The Clinton campaign's use of rock culture was deliberate and careful, and it yielded positive and clear results. In fact, Clinton's use of rock culture became a model campaign strategy.

This history is now taking on a new shape, as the appearance of rock music in politics proliferates across the globe. While rock may have different valences in other national contexts, the mere repetition of the phenomenon suggests that the shift in political spectacle is not a purely American phenomenon. Since Clinton's success on MTV, other would-be heads of state have followed suit. MTV Asia recently offered guest-veejay slots to Taiwan's four presidential candidates during a special "Choose or Lose" slot on its local Mandarin-language channel. Lee Teng Hui—the incumbent—was the only one to refuse the offer, and MTV claimed his refusal was only because he didn't want to alienate other media outlets he'd already turned down. Even mainland Chinese officials had no problem with the feature, which contained no overtly political content. MTV Taiwan communications manager Gerund Wu claimed MTV was central to the political campaign: "Political PR departments in Taiwan arrange media in categories A, B, and C. We were A because they said the candidates cannot afford to ignore the power of youthful voters" (Burpee, 1996). A few months later, Boris Yeltsin also appeared on MTV to try to garner the Russian youth vote (Kelley, 1996). Reggae is once again playing a part in Jamaican electoral politics (Oumano, 1997). In the United States, Vaclav Havel, Lou Reed, Madeline Albright, and Laurie Anderson recently showed up at a John Zorn gig in New York. Reed commented that "In our culture, we think it's such a big deal that [Albright] showed up. In a really cool culture it would have been lame if she didn't. One little sign of humanity and we fall all over ourselves" (Panahpour, 1997). The connection between rock and humanity is hardly the sole province of democratic party members; former deejay Rush Limbaugh searched for the "hardest-pounding bassline" he could find to open his show, and settled on Chrissy Hynde's song "My City Was Gone." Limbaugh was not the least troubled by the song's ostensibly progressive lyrics (which are not heard on the show): "Here I am going to take a liberal song and make fun of liberals at the same time" (Munger, 1997).¹³

Rock Culture and Political Culture

For all of Clinton's success at mobilizing youth as a category of identification and as a voter demographic, his use of the category is hardly consistent. After seeking the youth vote through MTV appearances and rock and roll affiliations, the Clinton administration and the 103rd

and 104th congresses continued the long tradition of youth bashing in the service of other political goals:

Increasingly, Clinton's health and welfare policy has consisted of blaming teenagers for nearly all major social ills: Poverty, welfare dependence, crime, gun violence, suicide, sexual promiscuity, unwed motherhood, AIDS, school failure, broken families, child abuse, drug abuse, drunken driving, smoking, and the breakdown of "family values," the latest count as of this writing (Males, 1996, pp. 6–7).

No doubt the language of "teen pregnancy," "unwed mothers" and "violent gangs" is in part code for more direct class- and race-based attacks contained in welfare reform and related legislative programs. But that the very term "youth" can stand in for these other vilified categories suggests that it is not simply an otherwise innocuous term. On the contrary, its very ability to do some of the rhetorical dirty work in place of other more inflammatory language suggests that it, too, has acquired a special status in political rhetoric. The political objectivity of youth as a category results in the concept shuttling between positive and negative poles at a frenetic pace. In this logic, there are "the children" (white, middle class) who must be protected; and there are the youth who are perceived as threats to the white, middle-class ways of life—children of the poor, youth of color, white kids "gone bad."

These are not new images in American political discourse; they have had remarkable durability and utility throughout the 20th century (Acland, 1995). The new development, and the one that marks Clinton's difference from his predecessors, is the utilization of youth as a category of political subjectivity. Here, rock culture becomes a means to an end, a kind of instrument that can be wielded by either party: it is as open to Republicans as it is to Democrats. This instrumentality stems from rock's unacknowledged ideological affinity with the political field as well as its adaptability to the history of political spectacle.

Rock culture and political culture have more in common than writers on either subject would like to admit. Rock culture, often through its investment in the category of youth, retains a strong affiliation with notions of authenticity. As Theodore Graczyk has convincingly argued, even the ironic "postmodern" stances of many current fans and musicians only exist in relation to this larger ideology of authenticity. This authenticity, in turn, provides a kind of endless loop into and out of bourgeois life:

Twenty five years ago the protagonist of Lou Reed's "Rock and Roll" rejected her parents' material comforts and felt that her life was saved by rock and roll. It does not follow that she abandoned bourgeois attitudes. Instead, she was moved by the freshness with which rock gives public expression to their underlying values (Graczyk, 1996, p. 226).

Other writers, such as Lawrence Grossberg and Katrina Irving, have emphasized rock culture's roots in middle-class life and middle-class values. While Irving (1988, p. 170) describes rock counterculture as "a protest against the middle class by the middle class"—a kind of inauthentic rebellion—Grossberg sees rock as an essential part of middle-class life, a response to boredom and alienation that does not have any essential political character: "Rock's ideology was squarely located within the commitment to mobility and consumerism, although these may have been constructed as necessary paths to a life of fun rather than ends in themselves" (Grossberg, 1992, p. 145). Rock ideology may provide a critique of bourgeois culture, but it is also part of the mechanism of its reproduction. The ideology of rock is thus not so much a question of "left" or "right," but rather a set of beliefs about individuality, affect, the care of the self. Put simply, rock ideology is a species of liberalism. Rock emphasizes a kind of authentic individualism, both in the musician as artist and in the fan as a self-fashioning person. It is an ideology of "freely chosen" self-empowerment through identification:

The unifying thread [of rock ideology] is an assumption that the unique individual is basic to authenticity. In a word, liberalism: there is no essential, common good beyond whatever autonomous individuals seek and choose as most worthy for themselves (Graczyk, 1996, p. 220).

This kind of thinking permeates rock ideology, and rock's individualism and populism are values quite sympathetic with the political field. As with Clinton's Elvis reference, rock ideology offers a language full of references to individual freedom, voluntary associations, emotional intensity, and personal authenticity without requiring any specific commitment to a political program or set of beliefs. As Graczyk puts it, rock ideology is big enough to encompass Rock-Against-Racism and Neil Young supporting Ronald Reagan; Fugazi and Skid Row. If it displays this kind of ideological coherence—a coherence around the nature of people rather than any kind of programmatic politics, then there is nothing about the ideology of rock that would prevent its use in political life.

Similarly, rock's appearance on the political scene is not any kind of carnivalesque rupture of political discourse. As a number of writers on the "public sphere" have noted, even if American political discourse exists with reference to an ideal of rational-critical debate, the practice of American politics has at least as much to do with the manufacture of public spectacle and personal identification as it does with voters making rational choices based purely on "the issues." Michael Schudson, summarizing the work of a number of historians, has argued that political spectacle has been central to the conduct of American politics, especially during periods of high voter turnout. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, political discourse was fused with popular culture: politics was more about popular songs and parades than it was about "issues"; Democratic and Republican party clubs doubled as dance halls (Schudson, 1992). Today, that tradition continues, as the media of entertainment are also the media of news and political discourse. While the youth of today don't hang out at dances sponsored by the various parties, it is certainly the case that political spectacle is organized according to the generic and media structures of popular culture at any given time. To become popular, politicians must act popular (Warner, 1992, p. 391).

Given the mutual affinities of rock culture and political culture, all that the political field required for rock to enter was a gesture of legitimation—a chance to bring rock and roll and its attendant appeal to youth as a form of political subjectivity into political culture at large. Tipper Gore's rise to national prominence through the PMRC represents such a moment of legitimation, where politicians found a way to "say yes" to rock culture, even as they retained the language of containment and middle-class respectability. The PMRC's discourse on rock music produced new possibilities for speaking and acting in political life, even as it appeared to be "about" the regulation of rock.

Concluding Questions

I have used the language of instrumentalization here because I want to move away from questions of authenticity and co-optation in the cultural politics of rock music. Authenticity and co-optation are both internal to rock culture; as a result, scholars who wish to talk about the political uses of rock music may have to reconsider their own analytical frameworks (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1993, p. 251).¹⁴ My original point in writing this essay was not to get rockers more involved in

mainstream politics—nor to decry their existing involvement—but simply to suggest that *the* culture of rock does not naturally contradict the culture of *politics*. More importantly, I have shown here that the political uses of rock extend beyond questions of agency for the disempowered or *the* repression of that agency through efforts to regulate rock music: the PMRC's *agitation* for the regulation of rock in the 1980s should be read as producing rock as a useful tool in politics, and not simply as yet another attempt to put the kids down. There is nothing in rock or rock ideology that makes it somehow resistant to or contrary to political culture. If the disempowered and alienated may under some circumstances be able to find a voice through rock culture, the powerful are also able to use rock and roll as a way of shaping their identities, their political expression and activity.

In demonstrating that simple fact, this essay raises another, deeper question. I could easily end with a call for the left to take back the terrain of youth and popular culture—to instrumentalize rock to our own ends. "We must find a way to use rock to persuade people of our position," the conclusion would say, "so that the left, too, can appeal broadly to the people." But this line of thinking already assumes that the "strategic deployment" of rock is the fundamental cultural-political question. A prior question is whether leftists should automatically and actively pursue—in theory or in practice—the instrumentalization of rock culture, given what that instrumentalization has been shown to entail.

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