

From Adolph Reed, *Class Notes*  
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## —Posing As Politics

C-SPAN and Black Entertainment Television are next to each other on my cable system. So when senators Paul Wellstone and Carol Moseley-Braun were making their valiant stand against the Republicans' 1995 budget bill, I passed an insomniac night flipping back and forth between their filibuster and *Rap City*. The contrast was striking, between both the images projected and the systems of meaning that imbued each with political significance.

A few weeks later, on a panel at a Democratic Socialists of America youth conference, I found myself in the middle of a discussion of hip-hop/house culture and its global dissemination. Cautionary suggestions about exulting too much in this youth movement's undefined, though allegedly great, radical promise produced the session's most passionately argued moments.

Around the same time, I received a list of working papers from the University of Chicago's public policy school, which was then William Julius Wilson's mini Tuskegee. The coauthor of one paper was a graduate student who had previously challenged my skepticism about the large political claims made for inner-city youth culture. The paper was about the "social control" problems that result from a supposed breakdown of intergenerational communication in impoverished black neighborhoods. This is conventional sociology of a decidedly conservative bent; it's a feature of the reigning species of culture-of-poverty ideology, the search for social pathologies that mark a defective urban underclass. Instructively, this student, who had tried to defend the elevation of rap first as political action, then as a necessary precursor to political action, could adopt without qualms the classically depoliticized, victim-blaming frames for talking about inequality and dispossession that have been the stock-in-trade of Chicago sociology since the early twentieth century. That's the beauty of cultural politics; it can coexist comfortably with any kind of policy orientation.

These incidents threw into relief for me the key problem with progressives' current romance with youth culture and cultural politics in general; it rests ultimately on a rejection of the kind of direct

political action that attempts to alter the structure and behavior of the institutions of public authority, what used to be called the state. And it ignores the action of the state itself. In both the graduate student's pro-rap and pro-social control arguments, there is no discussion of the government's regressive development policies, tax and foreign policies that reward capital flight and deindustrialization, chronic underfunding of education and housing for poor people, unequal delivery of public services, criminalization of poverty, or legacy of direct and indirect support for racial discrimination in defining impoverished black and Latino Americans' lives. Nor is there space in either formulation for considering the use of government or other political institutions to improve people's lives. The rap videos' projection of flamboyant cynicism, the pose of hard-bitten alienation that masquerades as "real," contrasts as sharply with Wellstone's and Moseley-Braun's focused resolve to fight for humane public policy as the rappers' avant-garde stylishness does with the senators' very straight self-presentation. The DSA advocates of youth culture's strategic importance elevate it as more vital than political work focused on government and public policy.

This dismissal of state-centered politics is a signal weakness of the left. It offers no guide for emancipatory action; rather, it is deeply harmful to the pursuit of progressive interests. It amounts to a don't-worry, be-anxious politics of posture. Beneath radical-sounding rhetoric, the shibboleths of academic cultural studies and the presumptions of identity politics come together to celebrate alienation by labeling it "resistance." Alienation is the opposite of politics; it is by definition resignation and quiescence.

There's a perverse logic at work here, taking off from the premise that the MTV generation's disaffection from conventional political action should be accepted on its own terms. This assumes a smug, Reagan-baby disregard for civic engagement as outmoded and boring, yet the irony is that, in the most literal way, there is political activity in the MTV generation. Clinton, after all, used MTV to court young voters, and various pop stars lent their celebrity to the Rock the Vote movement, which got its main media ride on

the music channel. MTV spawned its first celebrity political journalist in Tabitha Soren. Of course, it spawned another political celebrity, too: VJ Kennedy, who proudly declared her Republicanism, made teasing references to her virginity, and professed a desire to sleep with Dan Quayle. The point about youth culture is that it's *young*—by definition, naïve, inchoate, impulsive. Rock what vote? For whom? Clinton, Quayle, take your pick; they're both sort of cute.

As for rap, its political profile has stalled at the level of freaking out conservatives with songs about killing cops and peddling the timeworn notion of the outlaw—or in current parlance, "gangsta"—as political avatar. Individual acts of aggression, whether blowing away bank guards or beating up your girlfriend, are a political dead end (or in the latter case, a tactic of male dominance). Anger and self-definition are potential precursors to political action, but they don't constitute political action in themselves. And the politics they predict can be anything, including skinhead-style racism and fascism. Twenty years ago, the left called this sort of thing "adventurism," a distraction from both real politics and *realpolitik*. Today, having suffered decades of intensifying political marginalization, too many of us are prepared to smile gamely and call it revolution.

When I was treated on the DSA panel to the line about how young people all over the world are converging on a potentially explosive collective identity and perspective, I couldn't help asking how this view differs from hippies' fantasies of a transformative counterculture, Alan Freed's dream in the '50s that rock and roll would bring the world together, or even earlier hopes for jazz expressed in besotted soliloquies outside the Cotton Club or in Nancy Cunard's salon. And can we forget that it has been a string of corporate marketing campaigns—from Coca-Cola to Benetton—that has most effectively projected the image of a global youth culture knitted together through music and fashion?

I know, I know; corporate youth culture is inauthentic and co-opted; there's a real one out there about to erupt, tucked away from the eyes of all but the cognoscenti. Contemporary youth culture is

New and Improved—different from, more subversive than, its predecessors. But subversive of what? When all is said and done, defining subversion as avoiding incorporation into the mass market is nothing more than a call for permanent product revolution. This morning's authenticity is in the boutique this afternoon and the Paramus mall tomorrow.

Confronted with the charge that I'm just expressing a generational animus, I like to point out that it was my age cohort that invented the notion of youth as a politically meaningful social category, and I can produce witnesses to verify that I opposed it even then. But the idea of a distinct youth culture is older still; in the 1977 book *The Damned & the Beautiful*, Paula Fass examines its construction—already around a marketing category—in the '20s. Besides, objection to the idea of youth culture as political activism isn't confined to those too old to get in on the fun. Many young people now, as thirty years ago, participate enthusiastically in a shared symbolic world of music and style without imagining themselves to be doing anything of world-historic significance. Many embrace that world lightheartedly and apolitically; others do so zestily while understanding that their political commitments lie in a different domain—one that centers on fighting the balanced budget amendment and cuts in special welfare spending, organizing to preserve and extend antidiscrimination policies and women's reproductive freedom, to cut regressive military spending, and to rebuild labor.

Cultural production can reflect and perhaps support a political movement; it can never generate or substitute for one. There is no politics worthy of the name that does not work to shape the official institutions of public authority that govern and channel people's lives. Anything else is playacting.

## —Ethnic Studies and Pluralist Politics

For those old enough to have lived through the struggles for black studies a generation ago, the wave of campus protests in recent years demanding ethnic studies programs has a déjà vu quality, almost like the opening paragraphs of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*: "And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries, and costumes in order to present the scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language. Thus Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul, the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternately as the Roman republic and the Roman empire."

It's certainly understandable that the specter of "the Sixties" haunts student activism. Young activists seem to look over their shoulders, to orient themselves by the standard of that iconic time because the student movement of the 1960s was, after all, the last great outpouring of campus radicalism. But even if they didn't want to think about it, they couldn't avoid doing so. The right, in its *Kulturkampf*, has apotheosized the Sixties as a catch-all symbol for all that's evilly egalitarian in contemporary life. From a slightly different political direction, baby-boomer neoliberals—like the 1990s leadership of the Democratic party—weave the "excesses of the Sixties" into their tale of how "McGovernism" has discredited liberal politics. And, more to the point, overlapping the two are the oh-so-pious professional defenders of Holy Universalism, whose jeremiads against academic "balkanization" and "tribalism" echo the last generation's self-righteous defenses of Eurocentrism as "intellectual standards" and "objectivity" against early proponents of black studies. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s "common culture"—now as then—is one that demands acceptance of a chauvinist fantasy that